Life in the Early 21st Century: Three Stories

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Story 1:

The Story of a 21st Century 'Somebody': Independent Culture Creation in the 2000s & 2010s

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Disclaimer

This book is based upon the personal experience of the author. Events are described as the author experienced them, and as she remembers them. The actual accuracy of events and dates in the book are not guaranteed in any way. However, if there is any error, it is unintended.

Chapter 1

1.1 The World As It Was

Let me start from the beginning. We must remember how things were, once upon a time, or really not that long ago, if we are to appreciate where we are now, and what happened to bring us here.

As human beings, most of us would like to think that we are special, in some way. Most of us would like to think that we have something unique, to contribute to the world. My mother, Nancy, taught me from a young age that I should aim to not 'live and die anonymously'. However, for most of humanity, most people were destined to live and die very much anonymously, as just one small part of a large system, indistinguishable from the next small part. To be 'somebody' in this world, a somebody whose opinions would be heard in

any way beyond close friends, was a privilege very few had enjoyed.

Part of why the world had long been the way it was, was because of the limitations of the way people 'communicated' back then. For newspapers, radio stations and television channels to be profitable, there can only be a very limited number of each. In fact, regarding radio and TV, governments only issue a very limited number of licences to begin with, meaning that most people only had access to a dozen or so radio stations and a handful of TV stations. This situation only changed slightly in recent years, with the rise firstly of cable television in the 1980s and 90s, and then the replacement of analog TV with digital TV, which allowed more stations to be broadcasted. But still, the opportunity to 'broadcast' was very limited, and it was rationed out only to people whom the elite deemed worthy.

For example, in the old media, for a musician to gain audience, they had to have access to radio air time. This access is generally 'locked up' completely by big record labels, so no matter how good your stuff was, you could only play it at pubs, if the big labels gave you no time. It was also quite difficult to build a loyal following or show your 'uniqueness' adequately. Whilst 'celebrities' promoted by big media had the required avenues to impress upon others their carefully crafted 'images', most independent artists simply had no such chance to even be understood properly at all, when all they could do is to perform at shows randomly across their region, to audiences who mostly haven't heard of them before and will not hear about them again. Similarly, the only people whose political opinions could be widely shared were those published in newspapers and magazines, and you would have to first impress the editor if you were to even get a 'letter to the editor'

published. Besides, there was no way for most people to have an ongoing 'opinion column' that can be read by the public of any kind, unless they were contracted to do so by a media organisation. You just can't build a following, let alone a cultural or political movement, by random letters to the editor.

In this environment, there would eventually be no point for most people to continue to think of themselves as a 'unique individual'. There was a very clear divide between celebrities, established journalists and opinion leaders on one hand, and the rest of the population on the other hand. The former were clearly distinguishable 'somebodies', the latter were indistinguishable 'nobodies'.

I literally think that not having a voice in this world counts as oppression, and hence most of humanity had been technically oppressed,

though they did not know it. Just like how most people in history would not have even dreamed of much of what we take for granted as 'human rights' nowadays. It's the way human history has always been.

And beyond the selfish need to tell the world about yourself, the old world order had wider societal implications too. Whoever holds the power to get heard by the public also holds to key to control culture itself, ultimately. Hence in that old world, very few elites and their agenda would control the thinking of much of the population. Their views would be broadcasted via a variety of media and would dominate what people would here. The media may change over time, from newspapers to radio to television, but in essence, it's the same model of an elite few having the chance to speak up, and the majority having the chance to only listen. No wonder the culture of decades and centuries gone by were so conformist, and

minority groups and views had so little (essentially no) representation. In such an environment, it was also no wonder that only the mainstream, conventional and privileged were represented in culture, and the rest were disenfranchised.

This situation didn't just exist long ago. It was still so during my childhood, and indeed it was largely still so during my teenage years, as the world moved into a new century. My 2006 short novel Eastlands Dreaming was about imagining a future where culture creation was completely democratised. Are we there yet? I can't say for sure, I think we still have some way to go, but at least we've made great steps forward. When I first started a blog in 2003, most people hadn't even heard of blogs. It surely looks amazing in hindsight, how far we have come in less than two decades.

Throughout this book, I will be telling my own story so far, as a cultural voice in this rapidly changing world. But I will also be illustrating the wider story of how profoundly the world changed, in these first two decades of the 21st century. The technology changed first, and that was groundbreaking enough, but I think that the greatest change was in the culture. See if you agree with me.

1.2 It All Started With Technology

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. For example, I would like to hope that, one day in the distant future, the cultural changes gradually brought on by technological development will end all wars once and for all.

Technological changes also affect the way we live and experience the world, and the ongoing story of technological progress can often be interwoven with anecdotes from people living through these changes, providing the human side to this otherwise very technical story. For

example, my father recalls of a time when, to watch a football match, one would have to go to the local park and sit in front of its giant screen, as there were no televisions at home. I myself have always watched the world cup on TV, as it was more convenient, and nowadays my father and grandfather also do the same. Similarly, my mother recalls the first few months of getting a black and white TV set back in the 1960s, she would stay glued to the screen until they ceased broadcast around midnight every day (TV stations didn't broadcast in the middle of the night until the 1990s, I can still remember TV Guides having the listing 'Close' back when I was very young). Surely, kids today have much more to look forward to than the TV. It just shows how life changes, and the most exciting things often become boring in a few decades' time.

Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most

groundbreaking developments of all, in our times. Previous generations had different groundbreaking technology, but I believe none matches up to this. And it's interwoven with our own stories too, just like the generations who came before. For example, when I was recently doing my PhD, I reflected on the fact that we are so lucky to have access to almost any academic journal we want online, and read any article from any issue with several clicks of the mouse.

Convenience surely is a major benefit of recent technological changes, and it's the dimension many people have focussed on thus far. But in my view, the ability of anyone to start having a cultural voice is the true revolution. But let's not get ahead of ourselves here. There's still a whole story to tell, before we reach that conclusion.

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Before any of that convenience and cultural change became reality, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit I Wish I Was a Punk Rocker actually contained the line 'when computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven. Whilst I can understand why the aforementioned type of

computer would be scary to many people (I tried to teach my mother who never understood any of it), for me, as a kid, it was better than any toy they had in the 90s.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the internet. Back then, internet speeds were really slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. But for 12-year-old me, it was amazing enough that I was reading what everyday people halfway across the world were saying. If I added something to a discussion, someone halfway across the world might read it while I was sleeping, and reply to it. Just this thought

made the world seem like a less lonely place. The internet meant that the world had truly 'become one'.

And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was almost an every week thing. Sad to say that, in the 14 years since, the computers themselves had improved much more slowly, but then, it would be in this period that the 'real' revolution would begin. The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the

beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological advances in the late 90s and talk of internet speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation),

there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. One emerging use, the most groundbreaking in my opinion, was the ability to build a cultural platform, communicate with people, gain an audience, and do all of that independent of big media corporations' approval. Independent musicians were one of the first groups to embrace this idea, sometimes by simply informing people where they would play at shows next, and sometimes even sharing their music via the internet, although the slow speeds meant this was usually of poor quality. It allowed them to connect with their fans and build a following, in a way that mainstream media had denied them. Blogs, or weblogs, regularly updated webpages, were another phenomenon that raised its head around the turn of the century, and gradually spread from the geeks to the mainstream. It allowed people to have what is essentially a regular opinion column, something previously limited to cultural elites.

As a teenager I decided to be an independent musician, and as a semi-geek also saw the great opportunities the internet could provide in that regard. But I wasn't ready to make music yet, so that was still somewhere in the future. However, a blog could be easily set up in under an hour, and blog posts would only take an hour or less out of each week, so it was a thing that you could start doing anytime you wanted. Besides, I figured out that as a musician I would like people to really get to know me, as the artist behind the music is an important part of the music, so the blog would fit into my musical plans neatly in the future. With that in mind, I started my blog in August 2003. It had a very basic design, and I posted every now and then, about everything from world affairs to celebrities to politics (that was how most personal blogs were back then, and it might still be this way today actually). Of course, my blog

is more sophisticated today. But those few posts did mark the start of a long term habit.

Chapter 2

2.1 The Golden Age of Reality TV

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series The Hunger Games was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critiques who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and its appeal was two-fold: firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol (2002-2016) showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were transgendered. As a fan of many reality shows

including the Idol franchise (Pop Idol, American Idol, Canadian Idol and Australian Idol), Big Brother and Amazing Race amongst others, this dual appeal of both 'more ordinary' and 'less ordinary', both 'more relatable' and 'more interesting', was definitely a big factor in the interest.

While the internet became popular in the late 1990s and blogs were in widespread use by the mid 2000s, in reality, TV was still king during this period. There were two reasons for this: firstly, internet speeds were slow to begin with, and the situation only improved when 'broadband internet', which was typically 5-30 times faster than 'dial-up internet', became available. Broadband internet was first available in the late 1990s, but it was very expensive back then, and even in well developed cities in developed countries, most people only gradually signed up to broadband in the following decade. For rural areas it was

even slower. It was this uneven coverage that prompted Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to start the plan for a National Broadband Network in 2007, but almost a decade later, as of this writing, the project is only rolling out slowly. Whilst music and videos can be 'streamed' over dial-up connections, it was generally of very poor quality. For example, with music videos, the sound may not be clear and crisp, and you may not even see the singer's face clearly. The popular video sharing site YouTube was not launched until 2005. In reality, there wouldn't be much point before that time anyway, when only relatively few people had broadband internet. Secondly, old habits die hard. To this day (2016) my parents still prefer to receive the news from the TV. Even as technology had enabled it, the sharing and viewing of multimedia content on the internet had to gradually grow year-by-year, until the point where many people would spend more time on the internet than in front of the TV (we only reached this point quite

recently). For these two reasons, TV was still king until very recently.

But while TV was still king, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. Definitely not fast enough for people like myself, who were hoping to gain an audience solely using the internet. And of course it was an uphill battle. My website and blog had no multimedia content in the mid 2000s, as having such content would make it unable to show for non-broadband users (i.e. the majority). It only had text and a few photos, like most websites back then. Certainly inadequate for introducing someone to the world. Today, the internet is an important, and sometimes the main, avenue of acquiring and connecting with audiences, for many artists, writers, musicians and culture creators, myself included. But back then, most websites had a more 'facilitating' purpose. In many cases, people who already knew about a certain show

or a certain person would be able to find out more about them on their website, perhaps join a discussion on their 'message board'. Most audiences were not acquired via the internet, but the internet provided an opportunity for further information and connection, like finding out when a band would play near you.

While this wasn't the revolution people like myself were hoping for, it did change culture, and more than what I felt at the time, looking back in hindsight. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how

things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on. Moreover, contestants were often able to gain an internet following from the 'fan clubs' that develop on the shows' website forums, some of which may transfer to their own websites once the show ends. In ways like these, reality TV was already showing the way of future culture creation: involving characters which are real and approachable, and where the future can be interactively shaped by the audience.

In conclusion, in an age where TV was still King, reality TV was at least the first step towards democratisation of culture, and it was for this reason that I and many others found it appealing. It was still imperfect in that the only 'cultural creators' that could participate were

the dozen or so people the producers selected every year for each show, but that was at least better than having only celebrities approved by the cultural elites to select from. The future would be even more exciting, but we should be able to say that this was how the revolution started.

2.2 The Rise of Everyday People and Changing Attitudes to Fame

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. But this is not true, because even in the past, celebrity was often unearned and undeserved, and in my (and many others') opinion, many reality 'stars' were more deserving of recognition than their contemporary celebrities. Celebrities were like overlords because only they could have the aforementioned characteristics and nobody else could, but it was never really the case that

they were the only ones who deserved to have those characteristics. It was more like that the elites only wanted to grant the scarce opportunity (under the old media) to have those characteristics to people with the right connections (and perhaps the right amount of money). It was only now that people began to realise that it was not only the rich, glamorous and famous that deserved to be looked up to. That it was not only the musicians who received huge airplay who had the greatest talent. That it was not only talk show hosts who had the most interesting opinions on world issues. And so on.

Of course, all this also meant that an increasing number of young people believed that had what it takes to 'become famous', whatever it may mean (I hate using that term because it is ultimately vague and meaningless). Again, many traditionalists complained that reality TV made young people delusional about taking the

quick path to getting rich via being a reality TV star, avoiding hard work. But I did not, and still do not believe this is the case at all. Aside from the fact that most reality TV stars don't make it rich (typically only the winner gets prize money), who said it was all about money anyway? Maybe the older generations really don't get us, but many people in my generation (myself included) do lots of things not for the money. In fact, we often actively do hard work, not seeking money in return, like how I did two masters degrees and a PhD not expecting that it would increase my lifetime earnings, or like how all my other work, like this book (as well as all my other books, all my music, and my blogs), isn't aimed at making money at all either. We do things because we want to, because we have a passion about things. And I believe these young people were the same. They probably just wanted to contribute to our culture, to be a somebody rather than a nobody, to having a unique voice rather than to be taken for granted, and in that era where TV was still king

and bloggers like myself often felt like they were screaming into thin air, reality TV surely sounded like a great opportunity (especially for those who didn't properly calculate the odds of getting selected by the producers, but that's another matter).

In fact, I believe it is in many people's nature that they want to be a 'somebody' with 'something to say to the world', rather than just another anonymous being. It was just that there wasn't much opportunity for your average citizen to pursue this dream until recently. Many people therefore decided to put their energies to pursuits that would make them special in some other way, for example in my mother's case being one of the quite few Asian women who completed a university degree in her generation. But back in the 2000s reality TV seemed to offer an opening, and many young people understandably looked forward to it. Fast forward another ten years,

the desire to compete in reality TV among young people seem to have declined substantially, because there appear to be much better prospects of achieving what they want via their independent efforts using the internet. And further proving my theory that it's not just about the money, today (in 2016) there are many great blogs and video channels out there, whose owners are putting lots of efforts into, without making lots of money (it's hard to even make half an average income using blogs and videos in most cases).

The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example Idol rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the first gate. This infuriated many people

time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. Personally, I admire great talent, especially in music. Even though I must admit that my singing probably isn't the best, in music I often actively seek out the best talent to listen to, rather than just taking whatever comes my way. But this doesn't mean that anything other than the best singing doesn't deserve popularity. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

Overall, I think that the changed attitudes to fame brought on by reality TV were not only a healthy change for our culture, but also paved way for the revolutions that were to come. This really deserves recognition in our cultural history.

2.3 Lessons from Reality TV: The Importance of Profile, and of Being Real

Is a piece of art (including literature, visual art, music and performance art) more valuable in and of itself, or in connection with the artist? I think that, while each piece of art has value in and of itself, most art would definitely be more valuable when viewed with a knowledge of its context. And to understand its context, you must first understand the artist, because ultimately, the context of the art is the context of the artist.

All of this appear to be far removed from the concept of reality TV, often described by self-appointed intellectuals as shallow and appealing to the 'lowest common denominator', in their own words. However, shallow or not, every piece of art or performance is ultimately a way to connect

with the artist behind it. And that's why, even in popular culture, people are more likely to appreciate music, books, TV shows and movies made by people they already know and appreciate. Each previous 'connection' makes the next one easier, and more appealing. With this in mind, it is easy to understand why works from established artists are much more popular than works from previously unheard of artists. In fact, it has been estimated that it takes on average 1.5 million dollars to break a new musician into the market, per country. That's about 30 times the average annual personal income! No wonder independent artists have it tough.

And in watching reality TV, this lesson applies too. In the first few episodes of each season, the show generally focusses on letting the audience learn about the characters. They can do this in a number of ways, for example showing pre-recorded interviews with every

character, special short videos introducing a certain aspect of a contestant's life, or just via the free-flowing conversation between participants. In the beginning, the audience essentially watches a dozen or so people they know nothing much about, and it's not that interesting, to be frank. But once you have learnt about the characters, the show starts to get interesting. It's also why most reality shows are only interesting if you start watching from the beginning, and there is generally no point to start watching in week five, unlike world cup football or the Olympics.

Many political commentators in the 2000s pointed out a similarity between politics and reality TV: that campaigns for presidential or prime ministerial elections have become like reality shows, where the candidates' every move is captured on TV for a few months, and many people simply vote for the person they 'like' best, based on what they see. Many

intellectuals have despaired at the emphasis on 'likeability' rather than policies. Surely, the 2004 US elections, the first to be widely described like this, produced a result that neither the aforementioned commentators or myself liked. But my thinking is more like this: if this is the way the world is, we better learn how to survive, rather than just sit and complain. Maybe it's just that first, you need to connect with the people, so they know what you are all about, in the big picture sense. Then we can start talking about policies.

For independent artists and culture creators like myself, this lesson also applies: you need to let people know who you are, exactly, before they can decide to like (or hate) you (you can try to do your best, but the choice is ultimately theirs), before they can really connect with what you say. With this in mind, I changed the direction of my blogging. Rather than just talking about random things, I decided that

each blog post needed to tell my audience something about who I am, and what I am about (well, not strictly each and every post, but at least it should generally be this way). And unlike on television, many visitors to blogs are first time arrivals, so you don't want people to get the wrong impression based on the first thing they see. Therefore, blog posts can't just be random. They have to represent the person behind the post. This is actually often trickier than it looks, easier said than done. The hot and angry culture wars of the early 21st century, in particular, makes things even more difficult in this aspect. There will be plenty of times I revisit this concept in following chapters, which will serve to illustrate this point.

Furthermore, reality TV highlighted the appeal of the 'real' over the 'fake', more so than any previous mass media phenomenon. As previously discussed, many people like and indeed sort of look up to reality TV characters

because they are 'real'. Many celebrities like to say that they are 'real', but in fact, due to them being part of the mass media money making machine, and their need to bring monetary value to their financial backers if they want to keep their career going, they are often anything but real. While there are indeed reality stars who also 'play the game' and do what they think people want to see them do, the nature of reality TV means that most such people are soon caught out by the audience. Unlike in the world of celebrities, there is nobody to cover for them. On the other hand, the 'real' people, who are often unglamorous, a bit unworldly, and often may not have the best talent, end up being among the most well liked.

Independent artists and cultural creators are in a similar situation to reality show contestants here. They can have the unique appeal of being 'real' that mass media celebrities cannot practically have, or they can be fake, and

without a mass media machine to cover for them, they will soon be exposed for being fake. Due to reality shows only lasting for months but independent cultural careers (hopefully) lasting for decades, there really is even less scope to be fake than with reality shows. It is for this reason that, I believe, we must present ourselves as our real selves, and not what we think others' want us to be, if we want to earn respect in the long run. It is for this reasons that I have said some unpopular things, even knowing that they may be unpopular (the following chapters will visit some examples). If you truly believe in something, you can't hide it for too long. Again, the culture war dynamics of the early 21st century means that saying unpopular things will almost certainly lose you fans and gain you critics, something I have experienced again and again personally. There's no denying the pain when people who once liked you decide to turn on you. But this has not reduced my resolve to stay real, because anything else just won't work.

2.4 Lessons from Reality TV: Personal Stories can Change the World

If all you see is a limited picture of the world, then your opinions of the world aren't going to reflect what's really going on.

Most young people today, at least in most of the Western world, do not see being gay as a lifestyle choice. For most of us, this notion is ridiculous, and many of us indeed find it offensive. Why? Because we can see for ourselves, that this is clearly not the case. However, people who lived 100 years ago are much more likely to have believed that being gay was a lifestyle choice. Why? Were they stupid? No. Most of them just didn't know any gay people, as it was very dangerous to be openly gay. "The truth liberates us, so say it and embrace it," I like to say.

Mass media has tended to favour the conventional, both in terms of personalities and content. Television has long been criticised as having unnaturally low representation of ethnic minorities, for example. The reason is clear: mass media needs to appeal to the biggest group of audiences to make money, and that means appealing to their desire to see people like them reflected in culture. Furthermore, the mass media machine will only create 'celebrities' they think they can reap financial rewards from, and therefore any celebrities they 'create' will be similarly catered exclusively to the majority. Therefore, in a world where mass media dominates and dictates culture, minority lives and voices are ignored.

In the reality TV genre, however, things were a bit different (though not totally opposite): while most participants were of the conventional type, they often include one or two less conventional characters, to make the viewing a

bit more special. For example, the Big Brother franchise was often described by critics as a 'freak show'. However, the fact that a trans woman won British Big Brother 2004 did lead to at least some discussion and awareness around transgender issues, about ten years before this issue gained widespread recognition. I also believe that the inclusion of geeks, politically involved people, dedicated feminists and environmentalists, socially shy people and ethnic minorities who still embraced their own culture in reality shows also changed the widespread perception that these people were somehow 'less cool', which I can say was definitely the case around the turn of the century.

Reality TV showed the world for the first time that it's not the case that people are not interested in minorities and their lives; it was just that they had no way of getting to know and understand these lives. While mass media

tended to be conservative in this regard, fearing financial loss otherwise, the people out there (especially young people) have shown the world that they are better than the elites thought of them. What's even more important is the ability of this gradually increasing awareness in changing attitudes. Unlike when I was in high school, it is nowadays cool to be a geek, to be obsessed with social justice, and to be different and unique. Of course it took more than reality TV, but it was still personal stories and examples that changed attitudes. Knowing this has inspired my blogs and cultural commentary to include discussion on news and other stories relating to minority lives. It is a crucial part of fighting against racism, sexism, homophobia, and other forms of bigotry.

Chapter 3

3.1 A More Social Internet Comes of Age

As previously discussed, in the 1990s, technology was mostly exciting in and of itself, due to the rapid release of new hardware and software. It was also exciting in that the rapid advancements and expected upcoming technology like broadband internet held the promise of a very different life compared to what we had back then. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the 2000s, the internet developed many new capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010,

but they were an important part of internet history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of updating and the page would remain the same for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked similarly simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to

be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because uploading them was time consuming, and for the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex,

employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years

earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the need for a message board for some. Independent artists, who often do not have access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion

where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile, however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do,

both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests. Instead, they provided an opportunity to advertise on the site to gain fans, or 'likes', at a cost which was relatively affordable. Thus Facebook turned out to be an even better opportunity for many independent artists. Another social networking site that I did not first appreciate but have since found very useful is Twitter, a website that allows people to post updates, 140 characters at a time, and allows users to follow other users' updates. I originally found the 140 character limit frustrating, but it turned out to be a good way to keep fans and followers updated in a concise way.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great talents this way, including many

instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Sometimes I feature some of these covers on my official blog, because I believe we should encourage independent talent and help level the playing field. Mainstream media won't feature these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

3.2 From Broadcasting to Narrowcasting

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, often people would settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on in other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to actively capture the intense interest of niche populations.

Of course, this doesn't mean you cannot cater to more 'general' interests on the internet. For example, my blogs which talk about news and current affairs are designed for a 'general' audience, not for a particular niche, and I believe I have captured interest from a diverse range of people. However, large sections of the internet are dedicated to serving people of particular backgrounds or worldviews. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and environmentalists, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even ten years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect. I will revisit this fact

several times in the following chapters. Personally, I don't believe an echo-chamber effect is healthy, and I try to get my news from a diverse range of sources ideologically. As a cultural commentator and a 'citizen journalist', I believe this is the responsible thing to do, so that my commentary doesn't become part of the echo chamber.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared

culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions. For example, feminists news and commentary websites have allowed serious and popular discussion of feminist ideas well beyond academic and activist circles in a way that was never envisioned before, and the same thing has happened with the libertarian community. The recent rise of both feminism and libertarianism are thus, in my opinion, greatly enabled by the age of narrowcasting.

In fact, as long as you consciously widen your news sources to include a wide variety of viewpoints and ideologies, the age of narrowcasting allows you to explore and discover a richer mix of ideas. Fifteen years ago, when we got our news and commentary mainly from newspapers and television, the content

discussed was likely to be limited to issues of interest to the mainstream, and the viewpoints offered, even if the coverage was balanced, would only include mainstream views. The mix of ideas I get from my 'news' nowadays is definitely richer because of narrowcasting, and I love it. This rich mix of ideas has also been a useful inspiration in writing my own commentary for my own audience, as it provides me with an endless flow of new things to discuss and explore. The world is definitely a more interesting place than a decade ago.

Chapter 4

4.1 What it Feels Like to Join the Cultural Conversation

In an ideal form of cultural democratisation, people should be able to just say and do what they feel like, to join the cultural conversation. The world described in my novel Eastlands Dreaming is based on such an assumption. But the real world does not really work like this. Like it or not, as of 2016, mass media still controls the culture and what people are interested in to a great extent, and if you want to participate in the cultural conversation and remain relevant, you better talk about what others are talking about. Surely there will be some audience for a blog discussing the relevance of the French Revolution to today's world, but this audience is likely to be very limited, because frankly it won't be what many people are interested in, unless some mass media cultural icons decide to embrace the

topic. There is a reason why many blogs out there discuss the same things: it's the same things that are dominating the news, dominating people's conversations, and dominating people's cultural consciences. It's the same reason why so many musicians on YouTube would cover the same songs in the same month, which also always happen to be the songs in the top 5 of the charts. If they didn't do these covers, people wouldn't then listen to their originals.

But then, in a world where everyone talks about the same things, you have to have a unique angle if you want to stand out and be noticed. Taking the YouTube musician analogy a bit further, it's like how almost every cover of a song would be noticeably different from the next one in some way, and I'm not talking about just the different voices. But unlike covers of chart hits, where the worst you can do is to cook up something boring or

unappealing, in offering cultural opinion, if you say the wrong things, people can get really offended. I really wish this weren't the case, but having been on the receiving side of this anger many times, I can assure you that I am not exaggerating. And while I thought the reactions I got in the mid 2000s were bad enough, I think most people would agree that the rise of so-called social justice warriorism in recent years has made things a lot worse (this will be visited in later chapters, as this book is roughly chronological). Having someone say that my worldview is of a 'naive airbrushed Disneyland fairytale' almost sounds like a compliment compared to some of the name-calling out there today.

On the other hand, there are indeed rewards for taking a brave stand, on both major and even minor issues. In my personal experience, it is always rewarding to hear that someone really agrees with what you have said, or that

someone has been inspired by your cultural vision, especially after receiving many less complimentary comments. What I do (and what other writers, commentators and artists do) is ultimately for the people who will appreciate it, not for the 'haters'. Moreover, if nobody ever took a brave stand on anything, not only would the world cease to progress, it would be much more boring as well. Furthermore, taking a brave stand may attract unexpected publicity, which may be a very good or very bad thing depending on each person's view. For example, numerous bloggers and vloggers (video bloggers) have attracted much publicity in mainstream media for their very personal and heartfelt support and defence of certain celebrities or politicians, often to irrational levels according to some people's opinions. (While it wouldn't be in my personality to behave this way, I don't think we should be as judgemental as the aforementioned people, as almost everyone has something they are really passionate about.)

And then there are the haters, which you can also sometimes call bullies. Actually, the two can be different. Haters are not always bullies. Haters can legitimately hate what you say, the cultural vision that you represent, without an intent to bully you. People have hated what I said, and have told me bluntly so. This is not bullying, it's the way life just is, and I frankly prefer the world to stay this way rather than to turn into a world where everyone has to pretend to like everyone else. But there are also real 'bullies' too. There are people out there who spend their time on YouTube giving every video they see a thumbs down, for example. Some of the more extreme ones deliberately leave hurtful comments on the video page too. It is also known that there are people who would go to sites like Goodreads and deliberately give one-star ratings to independent authors, thinking it would hurt them most. In the more extreme cases, this

type of bullying can even become like a group sport, where many people participate one after another, almost as if competing to see who can cause the most hurt. The most extreme case so far would have to be Rebecca Black's Friday music video (2011), which attracted probably millions of haters. There was really nothing to hate about the song or the video - you may not like it, but any hateful reaction has to be bullying. I felt so disgusted by this episode that I dedicated several blog posts to this 'phenomenon' back then.

So what should we do about bullies? I actually think that, apart from the medium used, nothing is really new. Politicians and mass media celebrities have been experiencing these things, and on much larger scale too. It's just that it was such an uncommon experience once upon a time, that our parents and teachers wouldn't have known it, and wouldn't have discussed it with us. Maybe it will be different

with the next generation. Time will tell. But the thing is, nobody should care about them, because we do what we do for the people who appreciate us. I believe politicians and mass media celebrities, many of them who have more haters than fans, have actually always thought this way, and it's logical for them because no matter how many haters there are, it's only their fans that matter. It's also the logical attitude to have for any other participant in cultural creation. Haters can't hurt you if you don't let them. It's not like in everyday life, where you don't want your colleagues to hate you because it would make your life hard, after all.

So this is what it generally feels like to 'join the cultural conversation' and thus also to open up yourself to potential criticism. Is it worth it? I think it is.

4.2 Taking Cultural Stances

As was discussed in the previous section on reality TV, people are more likely to like, connect with, or even to look up to somebody when they feel they know that somebody. It's like how you often had to know your friends before you liked them. But for cultural artists, who only have a limited opportunity to connect with their audiences, this 'knowing' has to be done through several 'snapshots'. For mass media celebrities this would likely be via a combination of interviews on television, radio and magazines. In the case of reality TV participants, this would likely be via a combination of what they do in the show, plus maybe specific short interviews or 'profiles' shown during the show. In any case, all you get are a series of snapshots, from which different people may infer different things about the person in question. It is partly due to this that the mass media machine tightly controls the

'images' of their celebrities, making them even faker. No wonder many celebrities complain that people 'think they know them but don't really know them'.

But even if you are an independent cultural artist, and your medium is the internet, there's no escaping this limitation. Whether somebody learns of you from your videos, your blog or other channels, what they still get is a series of snapshots, although arguably there's greater flexibility than the very limited and often strictly rationed television time allows. Still, people can, and often do, think they know you from just several snapshots. And while some very 'stereotypical' or 'simple' personalities can indeed be constructed from such snapshots, in real life, people are more complex animals, with each person having a unique set of values and characteristics. But in a world where so many people are 'faking it' just to please their fans, many people seem to have forgotten this.

Mass media celebrities have their image fine-tuned by their management, and they are generally told by their management to 'stick to the script', often being a stereotype that pleases their fans. While people generally can't act out a stereotype all the time, for mass media celebrities, any 'inconsistencies' can be ironed out without much difficulty using further mass-media-broadcasted interviews, promotions and activities, even 'third-party endorsements' from other celebrities. Some reality TV characters also try to act out stereotypes they think will earn them certain fanbases, including the religious, the rebellious, the 'down to Earth', the confident and fearless, the care-free, and so on, and you see these types over and over again. (But then again, they only have to keep the act on for a few months, so it looks sort of realistic.) Mass media commentators and newspaper column writers also often try to maintain a stereotyped agenda in their commentary, lest they disappoint their audience and get fired. Therefore, most

commentators are either very conservative, very progressive, or very libertarian, and there is almost no in-between or mix.

I have had my fair share of the experience of people forming positive opinions about me from a few snapshots, and then deciding that they don't like what I stand for after all several months later, and believe me, it is a disappointing blow for me (although to be fair, you could also say that I disappointed the other person too). In my case, the most common reason for this seems to be the perceived disconnect between my strong stance against racism, sexism and homophobia on one hand, and my championing of cultural ideas and values I believe would support strong and stable families, on the other hand. I've even lost count of the number of times people have said things like 'I can't believe you're so conservative' to me, even though I have never voted for a socially conservative party ever. It

seems like my strong support for LGBT rights and my 'just say no' stance to drugs, for example, just don't fit together for them, although this is not even logical. Another way I have disappointed people is through my libertarian leaning views on the relationship between politics and culture, i.e. that the government should stay out of it. I have disappointed conservatives by saying that the government shouldn't punish drug users, and I have disappointed progressives by saying that politicians shouldn't call their fellow citizens 'climate change denialists' just because they have a different view on this matter to us.

In fact, it appears that if you want to disappoint nobody, the best thing to do would just be to choose a stereotype, stick to it, and 'fake it till you make it'. But I won't do this. Why? Firstly, because I don't believe in being fake, and actually I am uncomfortable about being fake. I am passionate about the things I am passionate

about, and I don't think I can hide it. Secondly, as previously mentioned, people actually like 'real', even if some are still not very ready for what 'real' looks like after years of 'fake' coming from the mass media. But most importantly, I wouldn't want my name attached to anything that's not 'the real me'. I am a unique person. If you want the same old stereotypes, I'm afraid you'll have to look elsewhere. I know that at least some people like who I really am, and that's enough for me.

4.3 Caught in the Middle of the Culture Wars

For the past few decades, the Western world has been engaged in one of its greatest culture wars ever. The two sides of this war are not exactly clearly defined, but everyone seems to agree that there are two clear sides. On one side are the 'progressives', stereotypically people who support civil rights, people who are against discrimination based on race, gender and sexuality, people who want nationalism toned down so that we can all live in a peaceful world of global citizens, and often people who care quite a lot about the environment. On the other side are the 'conservatives', stereotypically people who want society to resemble the 1950s as much as possible, before all this began. I don't think it's a logical grouping let alone a logical 'war', and I believe one day in the future history will agree with me. But for now, this is apparently what we are stuck with.

The tone of politics is severely coloured by this idea of culture wars, and it has actually been 'forever this way' in the lifetime of my generation so far. Social issues are divided along culture war lines, very unhelpfully. For example, equal marriage rights for same-sex couples (which I strongly support) belong on the 'progressive' side, and efforts to address the high divorce rate in society are generally seen to be on the 'conservative' side. Belief in action on climate change is on the 'progressive' side, and negative attitudes to recreational drug use, even if it doesn't involve advocating government punishment, are 'conservative'. Support for equal rights for women and minorities is 'progressive', while wanting abortion rates to be reduced, even if you don't want to ban it, is 'conservative'. The divide is quite strict in some people's minds, and if you don't want to upset people, you don't cross those lines. The political landscape itself is also

divided this way: in the US, the Democrats must almost always champion the 'progressive' side, and the Republicans must almost always champion the 'conservative' side, for example. Candidates running for the presidential nomination of these two parties generally learn to convert all their cultural stances to the stances of 'their side', even if they previously believed differently, because history has showed that more 'moderate' candidates don't do as well.

And it's not easy for other people to reject this culture war dynamic altogether either. Punishment is not only given to presidential candidates who don't 'toe the party line', it is also meted out to other politicians, celebrities, reality TV contestants and independent cultural artists alike. The most popular cultural icons almost always fall neatly into one side or the other of the culture wars, and those 'caught in the middle' are quite likely to suffer the

horrible consequence of being rejected by both sides. Cultural war type attitudes also often factor into whether someone likes a certain cultural personality or not. For example, some people have advocating voting to eliminate reality TV contestants who don't support marriage equality. I for one can't see why you should do this. It's logical to vote out a politician who opposes marriage equality to get one step closer to marriage equality, I'm not sure how voting out someone on a reality show would do the same. People have also expressed disappointment at celebrities not sharing their political viewpoints. For example, many young, progressive people have been disappointed to find out their favourite musician or celebrity is a Republican or would sometimes support Republican candidates. Politicians, mass media celebrities, reality TV personalities and independent icons alike who wish to cultivate a stereotyped image to please certain segments of the population, as previously discussed, must also toe the culture war lines to be successful.

For example, to fit the religious stereotype one would have to oppose marriage equality, or at least allow people to assume that they hold this stance. (This appears to be changing slightly in the past couple of years; it has become slightly more acceptable to be religious and/or conservative and to support marriage equality. But at least up to 2012 it was quite 'unacceptable' to many people.)

My attitude towards this culture war and the 'dividing line' is clear: I wish it doesn't exist, and I'm not going to respect its existence either. Of course, as previously mentioned, I have 'disappointed' quite a few people because of this. But as human beings, and especially as agents of cultural change, we must stand up for our beliefs. I'm hopeful that there are still people out there who will see this as the right thing to do, and I also believe that in my rejection of the culture war divide I am setting an example for others who don't want to

believe in the culture war but are still too afraid to speak up.

I don't believe in the culture wars because it divides people and gets nothing done. Using marriage equality as an example, the journey has been relatively easy in countries where the culture wars isn't a big thing (e.g. the UK, Sweden, Norway, Denmark). The same journey has been much more painful in countries like the US and Australia, where the culture wars are clearly in play over this issue. What I believe in is reaching out to people. Coming back to marriage equality, I even wrote a whole booklet arguing the case for marriage equality, directly addressing all common conservative concerns I could find, and using their language as much as possible. Most 'progressives' wouldn't even seriously discuss these concerns, in contrast. But if you don't discuss things seriously, how can you hope to change people's minds?

Chapter 5

5.1 The New Players in Elections

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political

biases, despite their claims of being neutral and fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, and even simply informal social network based discussions between people.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became

one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Around this time, many commercial news websites also came of age, and in time, would rival mainstream newspapers in readership. Traditional newspapers, on the other hand, would begin to move online, and may even develop international versions that are only available online (e.g. The Guardian Australia). Overall, the effect was that there were more and more choices in terms of where you received your news and commentary, and the power of major news establishments was reduced considerably.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. The internet and social networks in particular played an important role in the early popularity of

Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who would be elected president later that year. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks. It has been noted that the advantage of 'progressives' on the internet probably outweigh the advantage

'conservatives' have historically had with talk-back radio nowadays.

In this new landscape, as a 'citizen journalist' or an 'online activist', you can potentially influence the outcome of political campaigns and elections by more than just your own vote. I believe it's therefore a big responsibility for anyone engaged in these activities to be well informed, as well as passionate about truth and justice.

5.2 The Rise of Citizen Journalism

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more

negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct among citizen journalists. I believe that, as time went on, those with positive attitudes were generally proven right, and the negative aspects were uncommon enough not to be a major concern.

It was also noticed, even back in 2004, that conservative blogs only linked to other conservative blogs, and liberal blogs only linked to other liberal blogs. In fact, a study was conducted to prove this. Political blogs are generally highly ideological, and they generally wear their ideology like a badge of pride, unlike mass media outlets who often claim to be balanced. This is only natural, as blogs are a narrowcasting media, often catering to niche audiences rather than the 'general public' as a whole.

In fact, the culture of political blogs has evolved over time so that each political blog is expected to have a clear ideology, and often the clearer and more uncompromising the ideology is, the more popular the blog is. The world being the way it is, I decided to start being upfront about what I believed in and represented politically in my current affairs blogs several years ago, by putting a few sentences beneath the blog title. While I don't fit neatly into the 'hard left' or 'hard right' camps, not giving people a clear hint of your agenda would be failing to meet many people's expectations, in this culture. Moreover, if I didn't state upfront what I believed in, people constructing an idea of who I am based on snapshots of several posts may get the wrong idea, especially as other news blogs are often so clearly biased to one side. For example, when I stood up for Taylor Swift's 15 in 2009, people may have misunderstood me to be a conservative, and when I endorsed President Obama for a second term with lots of praise, people may have thought of me as

hardline left-wing. The culture of clearly biased and stereotyped news and political blogs has meant that people often form stereotypical judgements at first sight.

Despite this drawback, which I think time and the development of an even more diverse news blogosphere may be able to change, I still think that citizen journalism has been a force for good (otherwise I wouldn't be in it myself!). At least, we are no longer limited by what mass media bosses want us to hear and think about.

Chapter 6

6.1 I Wished for Political Passion, but I Didn't Expect This

Back in the 1990s, the world wasn't as political as it is now. Even university students were routinely described as 'apolitical', especially compared with their 1960s and 70s counterparts. The War in Iraq in 2003 changed things a bit, but by and large young people were still not very passionately political throughout the 2000s. Those older than us lamented a loss of political activism, and even some in our generation, myself included, wondered if our culture could be more political, as it was in the 1960s, for example. I remember watching the Hairspray movie in 2007, wondering if a similar fusion of culture and political causes, especially civil rights causes, could happen again. After all, even back then the majority of young people supported marriage equality, they just weren't passionate

enough about it. It was this thought that led me to introduce political discussions in my popular culture blogs, and even weave political ideals and civil rights issues into posts about popular culture and the entertainment scene. It definitely wasn't very common to do this, back then.

But then, things changed. I don't know what exactly caused the change, or what exact moment the change began, but bit by bit, young people became increasingly politicised. Maybe it started with the Occupy Wall Street movement, a response to the 2008-9 global financial crisis. Maybe the election of the first black US President caused a renewed interest in civil rights. Maybe the passion for marriage equality also played a part. Maybe the new online media, much of it having a political agenda and actively appealing to young people, sparked a change in attitudes. But it seemed that, for the first time since the 1970s, young

people and their culture were political again. And you could see it in popular culture too. Mass media celebrities started to come out in favour of various causes. Marriage equality was perhaps the most popular one to support, and almost everyone supported this cause. But other issues like climate change, racism and refugee rights also got plenty of attention in Hollywood itself. All this also coincided with a renewed interest in feminism, possibly driven by the new online feminist media. People began asking celebrities and politicians alike if they were feminists. In the beginning, most would give an unclear answer, but by 2014, it was very common for celebrities to actively identify as feminists.

It would appear that the times have suited my own approach to culture. After all, if the world were to stay apolitical, there would be limited ability to introduce political discussions in popular culture discussions. At best it might

bore people, and at worst politically charged topics might be seen as unfit for polite discussion (the typical 'never discuss religion and politics' attitude). And indeed, I am happy that we now have a much better chance to discuss political subjects close to our heart. But in a classic case of 'be careful of what you wish for', it hasn't turned out entirely like I hoped it would.

It appears to me that, in this brave new world of political passion, there is now more 'peer pressure' to conform your views with your peer group, your audience's wishes, or what people in generally would expect of you. While people are much more comfortable to discuss politics openly now, they seem to be very uncomfortable with contrary views. Maybe the decades of culture war had conditioned people to be this way, or maybe the new narrowcasting media has meant an increased echo chamber effect. Alternatively, several

decades of excluding politics from popular cultural discussions has meant that people are now unprepared for controversy. Either way, I still believe that it was a great thing that the culture became political again, and I hope that this issue improves with time.

6.2 Welcome to the New Diversity

The new politicisation of culture combined with the diverse and narrowcasting nature of the new media has meant that there is a new diversity of political opinions and persuasions. We now have everything ranging from those calling for a revival of communism on the left, to the 'neoreaction' on the right, an anti-democratic conservative movement. Thankfully, both extremes are rare. But even more interesting, are the people who lie in between the extremes, and who may still have an atypical set of beliefs overall.

How many political persuasions are there, really? Traditionally, people and political parties could be divided into progressives on the left, conservatives on the right, and moderates in the middle. More recently, a two-dimensional

diagram with with two axes, one running from libertarian to authoritarian and another running from progressive to conservative, has been often used, for example in the libertarians' favourite 'the world's smallest political quiz'. An alternative would be to have economic issues on one axis, and social issues on the other. But in my opinion, neither of these models can accurately reflect the diverse range of opinions out there, in the new media. Even if two people are approximately at the same position in the chart, they can still differ substantially in their political outlook. This is because everyone has a unique worldview, based on their values, beliefs and unique experiences.

I like to think of everyone as having a 'political profile', almost like a personality profile. And such profiles can be complex. For example, my profile would consist of a strong belief in the value of liberty and the government's actions being consistent with the most liberty,

distributed consistently with equal treatment. It would also have a strong focus on eliminating historical injustices and prejudices, like racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination. Finally, it would have a focus on upholding family values and the traditional cultural structures that make our families and society happy, but using adaptive and liberal means. The aforementioned values, in conjunction with my previous practical experiences of the world, would then determine my position on various issues. I think most people are not that different, except that they would have different values and experiences.

This kind of model predicts, and is indeed able to explain, the diversity of political views out there. For example, think about somebody who is very 'progressive', an atheist, a dedicated feminist and not homophobic either, but who wouldn't support marriage equality. While I

would respectfully disagree with her, I wouldn't jump to the conclusion that she is faking her beliefs, like some of my friends may do. The traditional feminist position of refusing to support anything to do with marriage, for example, could play a strong role in her 'political profile', especially if she was once active in the feminist movement in the 1980s or earlier. And indeed, I have met many people whose political views are 'more unusual', like the aforementioned case. If you take time to understand their 'political profile', it usually all makes sense, even if you can't agree with it personally.

6.3 The Rise of the Social Justice Warriors

I believe in social justice, and as I discussed previously, I am dedicated to helping end racism, sexism and homophobia in the world. Just a decade ago, many people would have found my passion puzzling. But nowadays, even people like myself have been criticised as not passionate enough about social justice and ending bigotry. In some cases, even very liberal college professors have unexpectedly come under this kind of criticism.

The recent phenomenon of Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) has changed the cultural and political landscape dramatically. The term SJW only came into widespread use over the past few years. (Sometimes it is used as a word of derision by their opponents, but often the term is used by the people described themselves. This term will be used here in a neutral sense.)

SJWs are people who take every opportunity to 'fight against' bigotry, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination, usually but not limited to using their words online to shut down bigots. Engaging in wars of words with 'bigots' are their most common activity, and other common activities include signing petitions (usually online), participating in demonstrations, petitioning for 'bigoted' people to be removed from positions of power, including both government and business positions, and sharing online posts that expose 'bigots'. SJWs often have an attitude of looking for bigotry everywhere they go, and some people have observed that the commonly agreed-to 'taboos' in the SJW 'community' have increased over time. SJWs, on the other hand, have claimed that various recent social changes, including the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision that all states must have marriage equality, and the recent rise in transgender awareness, is due to their efforts.

Against this backdrop, people who are against 'political correctness' have sought to fight back. Libertarians in particular have claimed that people have the right to freedom of conscience and speech, and SJWs are therefore wrong to prevent this, something I generally agree with. However, internet sites and groups that claim to fight against the SJWs have often featured lots of casual racist, homophobic and transphobic speech. It seems that, to protect the right of freedom of speech, some people feel that they have to use it in a way contrary to what the SJWs want, to prove that they have succeeded.

I believe that root cause of the SJW vs anti-SJW war is a lack of awareness and belief in the great tradition of liberalism, and if we want this war to end (I do), we need to reintroduce and reassert the values associated with traditional

liberalism. This has even become a major objective of my political commentary recently. SJWs themselves may not see it, but it is the liberal values of freedom and equal treatment under the law that have carried the marriage equality movement, not shutting down people who do not agree with it. Causing people to lose their jobs just because they do not agree with same-sex marriages will only alienate people. Equally, it is these liberal ideals that have enabled transgender people to speak up and encourage society to accept them, not some SJW movement putting pressure on people to conform. Political correctness is incompatible with liberalism, and will destroy the very values that led to the social progress SJWs celebrate. On the other hand, liberals and libertarians may be dedicated to freedom of conscience and freedom of speech, but when people champion ideas contrary to our values of the equal dignity of humans, we must speak out to the contrary, however respectfully. It is not 'political correctness' to simply state clearly

that we do not agree with any racism, homophobia or transphobia being expressed, if we just state our opinions without forcing others to 'agree with us or else'. While as liberals we must tolerate those we don't agree with, we have our own rights, and indeed a responsibility, to our own freedom of speech and conscience too.

I believe that racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of bigotry can be ended. But I believe in bringing people along, not intimidating them to agree. Things can only truly change, if we let the discussion happen, after all.

Chapter 7

7.1 So Have We Arrived?

Looking back, we have indeed come far, in terms of independent artists' ability to create and disseminate culture, and in terms of the ability for anyone to 'have a voice' or 'be somebody' if they only want to. We are no longer living in a world where only the cultural elite can publish books, share their art en mass, make political commentary with potentially great impact on the democratic process, or just share one's uniqueness with the world and gain a following. Anyone can do these things now, and for that our lives are richer and our culture is richer.

Are we where we need to be, however? I suggest not yet. We still don't have full democratisation of media and culture. The 'playing field' still isn't as level as in my

Eastlands Dreaming novel, although our technology has well surpassed the 2006 context of that novel. Why? Because those with the money and the mass media control still have plenty of influence. The top 100 music charts are still dominated by radio hits, and much better talent still doesn't make it there. The bestsellers in books are still usually the ones published by major publishers, complete with paperback editions. The truth is that, as of 2016, while independent artists can share their art with the world, 'be a somebody' and even have a sizeable following, we still can't hope to compete with the 'big names' backed by big corporations. So we've come a long way, but we're still not 'there' yet.

But then, I believe we are only at the beginning of a major change. As I have said many times, old habits die hard, and the cultural landscape takes time to change. I still believe we can get much closer to the ideals envisioned in

Eastlands Dreaming, even though we may not completely get there. This is because, over time, more and more people will adopt a lifestyle that brings them closer to the work of independent cultural artists, and in turn this will bring about a more and more levelled playing field between independent artists and those backed by corporations. For example, the gradual adoption of e-books over time, an area in which we will likely see progress in the decades to come, will greatly level the playing field for independent authors. Of course, those with the money can still advertise liberally. But then, the increasing use of social networks will mean that word-of-mouth may become just as important in the future.

Just as Angelle was optimistic that technology would level the playing field for her in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, I am optimistic that technology will level the playing field for all of us, year-by-year, decade-by-decade.

7.2 Join the Culture, and Offer What You've Got

We are really very lucky to be living in a time where we can actively participate in the culture and offer our angle to the world, even if the playing field is not quite entirely fair as yet. So what are you waiting for? I suggest that, if you haven't started doing so already, it's time to 'join the culture and offer what you've got'. Right now, in 2016, although everyone is theoretically able to be a culture creator, statistically most people are still passive cultural consumers. I think this is a shame. I am optimistic that, over the years, things will improve, as our culture gradually shifts to accommodate this new reality.

I also believe that, in this new cultural landscape, everyone should just be themselves and offer the world what they've got. Everyone

should offer their real persona, their real stories, their real ideas and their real beliefs. We have seen, from the golden age of reality TV to the popularity of many independent cultural icons for just being 'real', that people would much prefer 'real' to 'fake'. The world is also a richer place when everyone is true to themselves. Sadly, some people think that they can become more popular if they fake another personality, another story, or another set of beliefs and values. I don't think this works, personally. My mother had taught me from when I was young to be true to myself and not compromise my integrity for perceived benefits, and I think this has worked very well for me in life, and especially as an independent cultural artist.

Let's put this another way. If you stay real, when others compliment you, you know that they are liking the real you, and this is very rewarding. However, if you fake a persona, and

others compliment that persona, it is essentially meaningless to the real you. Why would anyone even do it?

7.3 Dare to Dream

Finally, here are some parting words.

One of the best gifts my mother gave me was to teach me to dare to dream big.

The world is only the way it is because of dreamers. Dreamers came up with new ideas, and worked hard to make them come true. If we didn't have dreamers, we would still be living in caves and hunting for food. Dreamers are central to every revolution that has ever been, and will ever be.

When I was very young, the depressing reality was that only a small, select elite had a cultural voice. But it was always my dream, indeed my plan, to share my stories and my ideas with the

world. As my mother often said, 'when there's a will, there's a way'. And indeed, there was a way to fulfil my dreams, right when I was ready to pursue it.

Part of being a culture creator is to dream big, to see things that the conventional just can't see yet. If you want to be a visionary, you cannot be limited by the current context around you. You can't be limited by what's currently 'possible', and what's 'not possible'. History and fortune do not favour those whose thinking is limited in this way.

Just remember, dream big, and you might get there someday.

Appendix

Issue Profile: Technology and Life in the Early 21st Century

Technology had always played an important role in changing the world, fundamentally. It has changed the way people communicate, the way people understand things, the way people see the world, even the way wars are fought (read about how World War I was mostly fought if you are interested). It is also a source of hope, hope for a better future. Computer technology, the internet, and associated developments must be the most groundbreaking developments of all, in our times.

In the beginning, technology was simply either scary or exciting, in and of itself. Yes, there was a time when computers were indeed scary to many people. The 2006 hit I Wish I Was a Punk

Rocker actually contained the line 'when computers were still scary', referring to an earlier time. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the average computer would have a black-and-white (or black-and-green) screen, and the user interface consisted of line after line of text appearing on the screen. The only way to control it would be via typed in commands, and you had to memorise those commands and get them exactly right, or the computer will refuse to perform the function. In those days, not all kids would learn how to use a computer, although I practically demanded my father to teach me back when I was seven.

But then it was about to get even better. In 1995 my family got a new computer with a coloured screen, which was also controlled by a mouse. For the first time you could actually draw pictures with the computer, and print out the resulting 'artwork' in colour. And in 1998, just before I started high school, we got the

internet. Back then, internet speeds were really slow, and the narrow bandwidth also meant that web pages had very basic designs with minimal graphics, and almost never had video content. And the computers themselves were now getting very exciting, simply because they kept developing at such a rapid pace. When I started high school, the average speed of a computer was 300MHz and they came with 32 or 64MB of memory, by the time I graduated (1.5 years early, keep in mind, so only about 4 years later), the best computers had more than 3GHz (i.e. 3000MHz) of speed and often had more than 1GB (i.e. 1024MB) of memory. That's more than 10 times in both measures! When I was in high school, exciting computer related news was almost an every week thing. The rapid development of computer technology coincided with the beginning of a 'new millennium', around the year 2000. Even when I was younger, there was much anticipation about what life beyond the year 2000 would look like. But with the rapid technological

advances in the late 90s and talk of internet speeds going up 30 times or more with 'broadband internet' coming soon to every household (it surely didn't disappoint when it did come to pass), this 'future anticipation' grew hotter and hotter. The year 2000 was the year of the '.com boom', where many people invested in technology stocks, almost certain that they would get huge returns one day. Of course that ended in the '.com bust' as any stock market bubble would have, but much of that investment actually did power future internet-based developments in hindsight.

With so much new technology, the next question was how we could use it. Unlike the television or cheap long-distance phone calls (the exciting things of my parents' generation), there was not ONE use for computers and the internet, but potentially MANY uses. In the early 2000s, this began to materialise, although still slowly initially. But in the later half of the

2000s, the internet developed many new capabilities, and this opened up many great new opportunities.

Even in the 1990s, many people liked to create 'personal webpages'. Many websites, GeoCities being the most famous, provided an easy way for even computer novices to do so. Most of these websites went out of business by 2010, but they were an important part of internet history, and I would say, our collective cultural histories. When GeoCities finally shut down, there were even multiple attempts to create archives of the site, so what was on it would not be forever lost. Most 'personal webpages' were very simple, and looked rather ugly and bare by today's standards. They typically had a single-coloured background, a dozen or so low resolution photos, and text introducing the person in question to the world. Many were updated only sporadically, and often after a while their owners would simply get tired of

updating and the page would remain the same for years. By the early 2000s, it had become more popular to create 'blogs', or weblogs instead. The central difference was that a blog was designed to be updated with new posts regularly, and blogging sites made adding new posts easy. Most early blogs also looked similarly simple as personal webpages, and many such blogs also doubled as personal webpages. But at least, they are more likely to be updated regularly (although many owners still got tired of them eventually.)

But the advent of widespread broadband internet changed things. Sharing multimedia content like photos, music and videos had become much easier. The use of social networking sites, where people can connect with friends, share their 'status' and share multimedia content, reflected this new dynamic. Early personal webpages and blogs typically only had few photos, because

uploading them was time consuming, and for the readers, pages with many photos also took very long to load. But with broadband internet, whole photo albums can be both uploaded and downloaded within minutes. This became, arguably, the central activity of social networking sites like Friendster, MySpace and Facebook, all which came of age in the 2000s. The increased bandwidth also meant that website design could be more complex, employing more graphics, thus showing more differentiation and 'personality'. Particularly in the case of MySpace, a social networking site which was the most popular such site during its peak in the mid-2000s, it was popular to decorate your profile page with 'themes' and other graphics that were freely offered at third party sites, making each profile look unique. At the time, many sites sprung up to offer such graphics specifically for use on MySpace, often making a handsome profit from the large number of visitors.

MySpace was also a popular place for independent musicians and artists to collect fans. As an independent musician just starting out back then, I appreciated the ease of just uploading my songs onto my MySpace profile, which made it available for both streaming and downloading to all my friends and anyone else who visited the profile. This may not seem like 'magic' anymore nowadays, but just a few years earlier, if you wanted to share your music on the internet, you had to find a site to host it, add the right players to your site, and fiddle with lots of code so that the players could find the right stuff to stream, all of which sounded really daunting even to this semi-geek. In contrast, MySpace offered a place where your music, your photos, and any band news could be easily accessed in one place, and it could be all set up in under an hour. Your fans could also send you messages or leave you comments through the MySpace page, saving even the

need for a message board for some. Independent artists, who often do not have access to huge sums of money to get a professional website created, now had a much more level playing field, when it comes to internet presence.

Social networking sites also allowed independent artists to get exposure they would not otherwise get. Recall earlier discussion where I reflected upon the fact that people generally had to learn about a TV show, a movie or a musician in traditional media before they would use the internet to find out more? Social networking changed this dynamic. Even if an independent artist had an official site, people who don't know them are not likely to visit that site. It is unlikely that people will stumble upon websites of people they don't know about randomly. An official website is therefore not a great tool to collect new audience. Your social networking profile,

however, could be accessed by people visiting the site for other reasons, for example via a general search of new friends or new music on the site. I know this because, during the era of MySpace for example, I got several times more hits to my MySpace profile than my official website. Some bands also liked to send random and unsolicited 'friend requests' to people, in order to get their attention and 'friendship'. This was a controversial practice, something that many other artists like myself didn't do, both because it was officially banned, and because most people find such requests an annoyance leading to a bad first impression. I also promptly deleted any such requests that came my way, as did many other people. The social networking site Facebook, which had overtaken MySpace to be the biggest such site by 2010, prevented such behaviour by actively prohibiting bulk, unsolicited friend requests. Instead, they provided an opportunity to advertise on the site to gain fans, or 'likes', at a cost which was relatively affordable. Thus

Facebook turned out to be an even better opportunity for many independent artists. Another social networking site that I did not first appreciate but have since found very useful is Twitter, a website that allows people to post updates, 140 characters at a time, and allows users to follow other users' updates. I originally found the 140 character limit frustrating, but it turned out to be a good way to keep fans and followers updated in a concise way.

Sharing music so easily was great, but sharing videos is even better. Even if you don't have an official music video, sharing your music with a lyrics video is, in my opinion, much more effective, and I always do it this way nowadays. The ability to easily share videos began with the launch of YouTube in 2005, and also other similar video sharing sites like Vimeo. Again, as with MySpace and Facebook, people can unintentionally stumble on your offerings at

sites like YouTube and Vimeo, creating a further avenue to gain audience. Moreover, it has become popular to do covers of currently popular music on YouTube. This is because nowadays many people search for and view official music videos on YouTube rather than on television (which caused a global decline in video countdown shows), and some may further explore the variety of covers that also come up in the search results. I have found many great talents this way, including many instances where I believed the cover to be clearly better than the original. Sometimes I feature some of these covers on my official blog, because I believe we should encourage independent talent and help level the playing field. Mainstream media won't feature these talents, so it's up to us independent commentators to do it.

The emergence of broadband internet and social networks were key to the rise of

independent cultural artists, but it is important to note that other technological developments also helped level the playing field further. These new technologies were originally conceived as ways to make life more convenient, and it was also for this reason that the technologies became widely embraced by the public. But, in my opinion, the most revolutionary aspect of these changes was that they enabled independent cultural artists with limited means to deliver their products on the same platform and in the same context as mass media backed players. This change is akin to the invention of large scale printing presses in its significance, in my opinion.

The first big change was the digitalisation of multimedia content. When I was very young, music and video always came in a physical format, to be bought in a physical store. Music came in cassette tapes and CDs, and videos came in large black VHS tapes. Anyone wanting

to share their music and videos en mass would have to first produce these physical products en mass, at a huge cost to themselves. And then they would have to approach stores to take their product and put it on the shelf. While the first step was already prohibitive for most people, the second step was even more prohibitive, as most video and music stores would only sell products sourced from major distributors. This was understandable, as shelf space was limited, but was also very unfair.

By the early 2000s, it was common for music and videos to be distributed as digital files. The MP3 format for music in particular became ubiquitous. Dedicated MP3 players and similar technologies like the Apple iPod further helped popularise digital music, because they were smaller and easier to carry around than portable CD players and a stack of CDs. This made mass distribution possible for the first time, for many artists. But still, in that age, not

having a physical album for sale in record shops meant that you were 'taken less seriously' in the eyes of some people. Moreover, a substantial portion of the population still were not familiar with accessing music and videos using new methods. Several more years later, things got better still for independent artists. By the early 2010s, paying for, downloading and listening to music digitally had become the new normal. Buying physical albums became the exception rather than the norm, so much that record stores began shutting down or changing their business model. As all music is now delivered in digital files, music from independent artists now have the same format, ease-of-use, and often similar quality to those from major labels.

The other big change was the popularisation of e-books. This happened slightly later than with digital music and videos, and the process appears to be still ongoing as of 2016. E-books

were around even in the 1990s, but few people would bother to read them, as they could only be read in front of a computer. But by around 2009, things began to change. The availability of portable e-book readers, either in the form of dedicated readers like the Amazon Kindle Reader, or in the form of tablet computers like the Apple iPad, encouraged people to start reading e-books. Of course, old habits die hard, and this change is bigger than switching from CDs to MP3s, and will take time. To this day, there are plenty of people who still insist on reading paperbacks. But more and more people are reading e-books. I have been publishing books in the e-book formats since 2006, and the past few years have definitely seen an increase in downloads.

The effect of a switch to e-books for independent authors is similar to the effect of a switch to digital music for independent musicians. As with records and video tapes,

paperback books have to be printed at the author's own cost before being able to be shared en mass. There is also limited shelf space in bookstores, and they typically reject products from independent authors. This is why, in the past, it was essential to have a contract with an established publisher if you wanted to be a serious writer. This is why, in the past, so many people who had stories to tell to the world never got the chance. E-books are therefore definitely a revolution that is happening around us right now, and not just for convenience or environmental friendliness.

Issue Profile: Technology and Politics

As media changed, so did politics, both in its content and the way the 'game' was played. In fact, this is a core theme in my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels, set in the context of political events in the early 21st century.

Mass media outlets, including television, radio and newspapers, have long been the avenue through which large parts of the public came to understand what was going on politically. Unless you were a political insider, mass media was going to be how you got your political news, in the 20th century. The potential for these outlets to sway opinions and change minds, with implications for the democratic process, has long been recognised, used and feared. Television channels and newspapers have long had reputations of having political biases, despite their claims of being neutral and

fair, and the existence of an extensive catalogue of conservative leaning talk-back radio stations in countries like the US and Australia among others have greatly helped the conservative side of politics over the years.

But in the 21st century, mass media is no longer the sole source of information and influence in politics and election campaigns, and many people believe that, as the years have passed, their influence has waned. Taking their place are information sources in the 'new media', including internet news websites, blogs, and even simply informal social network based discussions between people.

The influence of news websites and blogs on politics was first noticed around the 2004 US elections, when both liberal and conservative blogs proliferated, and political blogs became one of the largest genre in blogging, both in

terms of the number of blogs and total audience received. Bloggers who reported and commented on news events began to be described as 'citizen journalists', and many intellectuals began pondering on what effect this rise in 'citizen journalism' would have.

As with every major social change, there were people who welcomed it, and there were people who did not. Those with more positive attitudes were hopeful of a new era of richness of news sources, information and commentary and also the rise of prominent voices outside 'the establishment', and those with more negative attitudes were fearful of inaccuracies, misinformation and unprofessional conduct among citizen journalists. I believe that, as time went on, those with positive attitudes were generally proven right, and the negative aspects were uncommon enough not to be a major concern.

It has often been said that while traditional mass media 'broadcasts' stuff to its audience, on the internet we 'narrowcast'. This is because mass media typically feeds audiences of millions or more, all with diverse backgrounds and interests, in a one-size-fits-all manner. However, websites, blogs, internet video channels and the like are typically only viewed by people interested in them. Also, when watching television, often people would settle for watching something they just don't hate if there is nothing better on in other channels at the time. But with the internet, people surf away immediately if they lose interest. Therefore, many parts of the 'new media' are designed to actively capture the intense interest of niche populations. There are news and commentary websites specifically serving conservatives, liberals, libertarians, leftists, feminists and environmentalists, for example, and nowadays a lot of people would get most

of their news from such sites, something that would not have been the case even ten years ago. While the main negative effect seems to be the decline in circulation, and in some cases, the termination of many traditional printed newspapers, another effect is that many people only receive news and commentary from a point of view similar to theirs. This can potentially create an unhealthy echo-chamber effect.

On the other hand, the effects of a gradual move to narrowcasting are not all negative. Minority voices and concerns have historically been poorly served by mass media broadcasting, which has tended to ignore them in favour of narratives more comfortably received by the majority. The internet and the age of narrowcasting has allowed various niche minority groups to have their own voice, in a way that traditional broadcasting didn't allow. This has also allowed previously relatively

isolated individuals who share something in common to come together and have a shared culture, thus empowering them. The rapid empowerment of the LGBT community over the past two decades is, in my opinion, the best example of this. Furthermore, narrowcasting has allowed light to be shined on less mainstream opinions. For example, feminists news and commentary websites have allowed serious and popular discussion of feminist ideas well beyond academic and activist circles in a way that was never envisioned before, and the same thing has happened with the libertarian community. The recent rise of both feminism and libertarianism are thus, in my opinion, greatly enabled by the age of narrowcasting.

If the 2004 US elections were the first time mass media commentators started to notice blogs and 'citizen journalists', the 2008 US elections were the first time social networking played an important role. The internet and

social networks in particular played an important role in the early popularity of Democratic candidate Barack Obama, who would be elected president later that year. But this was only the start. Soon, it became inconceivable to run an election campaign without a social networking presence, especially on Facebook and Twitter, which would soon become the dominant social networks. Also importantly, it wasn't just political candidates and parties using social networks. There were also social network profiles for different causes, for example regarding marriage equality, or climate change action. People could receive news and share their opinions via these profiles, and also share news from the profiles with their own friends, spreading the word. As a result, many more people became politically passionate than ever before. This was especially true of the younger generation, who were the biggest users of social networks. It has been noted that the advantage of 'progressives' on the internet

probably outweigh the advantage 'conservatives' have historically had with talk-back radio nowadays.

Issue Profile: The 2003 War In Iraq

The anti-war movement was arguably at its greatest height during the Vietnam War of the 1960s and 70s. For the first time ever, young people bravely ignored the traditional expectation that to be patriotic one had to support their country's wars unconditionally, and championed peaceful alternatives. Ever since, it had become much more socially acceptable for a country's citizens to disagree with their government's decisions to wage overseas wars, while still being a true patriot. Indeed, some would argue that true patriots have the responsibility to voice their disagreements in this regard.

Then conscription was abolished, there weren't as many large scale unnecessary wars anymore, and the anti-war movement went quiet.

Until 2003. Described by critics even back then as 'the new Vietnam', and not even authorized by the United Nations, the US Bush Administration launched a war on Iraq, along with their allies, chiefly the Blair UK government and the Howard Australian government. Crowds of Americans, Britons and Australians filled the streets in protest, but these pleas were ignored by their leaders. Opinion polls showed that the UK and Australia in particular had large majorities against the war. Universities in these countries even had student strikes, just like back in Vietnam's days. Although conscription was now long gone, the idea of 'not in my name, not with my taxes' was passionately held by many people bitterly opposed to that war, my 16-year-old self included. Yet we could do nothing about it, just like Vietnam.

But there was indeed something citizens in those countries could have done -

retrospectively. The US and Australia had elections in 2004, and the UK had elections in 2005. All three governments could have been made to pay the price for the war. Yet none did, as all hung onto power safely. So firstly there was the despair that we could not stop our governments from waging an unnecessary war, then there was the despair that our fellow citizens wouldn't even punish the governments for doing so. For my part, 2004 was my first election, and I voted to punish Howard for the war. I did my part. I also vowed to always vote for my values above my economic interests unless those economic interests were my basic survival. If only more people would do that.

Our generation was not there for Vietnam, and luckily. None of us were conscripted by our governments to die overseas, and we have the Vietnam anti-war movement to thank for this. Yet, in those few months in the first half of 2003, I felt like just by telling everyone I was

against the war and signing petitions to that effect (yes, this part of Angelle's story in the Princess's Spirit Trilogy was inspired by my own), I shared something in common with past anti-war movements like Vietnam, especially since I was a university student too. I read up on the history of the Vietnam war and the anti-war movement, in the university library. I felt like the anti-war movement is a continuous ongoing struggle, and will be with us until governments stop waging unjust wars, and that I was doing my part, no matter how small it was. War will not be extinguished in one generation, but bit by bit, we will get there.

Fast forward to 2016. The British government has just released a report, the Chilcot report, concluding that the war was not adequately justified. Many of us feel vindicated. We were right. Upon the release of the report, Australian independent MP Andrew Wilkie called for Bush, Blair and Howard to be trialled at an

international court. It's something that I have been calling for, for 13 years. It doesn't look like happening anytime soon, unfortunately.

p.s. It has to be noted that, the war aside, I actually found Blair to be a reasonably good Prime Minister. Bush and Howard, on the other hand, I wouldn't have supported them even otherwise.

Issue Profile: The Religious Awakening That Never Was

The 2004 US elections was famed for the rise of so-called 'values voters'. Such a voting bloc were identified when pollsters asked people what they based their votes upon. Those who answered 'moral values' or something similar were categorised as 'values voters'. In truth, I believe people should vote with their values rather than their economic interests, unless such economic interests have to do with their basic survival. But the 'values voters' described were overwhelmingly conservative and religious, and conservatively religious, and largely voted for Republican President George W. Bush. Let me explain in detail.

In the aftermath of the 2004 US elections, analysts pointed to the new voting bloc of 'values voters', who they believed were

ultimately crucial for carrying President Bush to his second term. The 'values voters' were generally conservative, religious people, and had issues of religious morality high up on their priority list, chiefly abortion and 'gay marriage'. In fact, it was common to describe the beliefs of this crowd as 'God, guns and gays'. Analysis found that this bloc represented up to a quarter of the voting population, and would surely have made a difference in otherwise close elections like 2004. They were also found to have a high rate of turning up to vote. However, this finding was probably confounded by the fact that there were same-sex marriage referenda running at the same time as the federal elections in most states during 2004. I will come back to this later. But at the time, several commentators even said that America was perhaps experiencing another 'Great Religious Awakening', akin to previous ones that had, for example, inspired the prohibition.

In light of this 'finding', there was a renewed focus on the role of conservative religion in politics. Everything from the way church groups would encourage their members to enrol to vote, to the way conservative talk-back radio and cable television was run, to the rise of new megachurches featuring pop music catering to young people, were analysed in detail. And it wasn't just in America. This widespread concern about the rise of the 'religious right' in politics was even felt in countries like Canada and Australia, where religion didn't traditionally influence politics, and religion was not thought to have affected the most recent elections.

As a young, committed libertarian-leaning liberal, I was of course horrified. While the young people I knew were not part of the 'religious right', media reports made it seem like that the 'religious right' were a large army, somewhere out there, ready to take over our culture. If even the 'adults' thought that it was

true, then it must be true. Decades of enlightenment were about to come face-to-face with a powerful force wanting to wipe it all away. On the other hand, I became very interested in the organisation of the 'religious right', and wished that liberal forces could be similarly well-organised. Analysis of the religious right also highlighted the fact that their relatively strong families, relatively clean living lifestyle and idealistic and ambitious army of young people was part of what made them strong. I was thus inspired to start encouraging fellow liberals to start embracing a cultural agenda of strong morals, inclusive family values, and ambition to improve the world. I had always believed in such values personally, but now I understood that it was important for my fellow liberals to embrace them too. If we didn't want big government conservatism to take over, we must first be morally strong ourselves. To this day, all this remains an important part of my cultural agenda. Great

Religious Awakening or not, these remain solid values for life.

But then, just a few years later, we started to find out that the Great Religious Awakening of the early 21st century probably just never was. The victory of Obama in 2008 was the first clue. Some commentators were prepared to say that the Republican Party would be kept in power by 'values voters' for a generation, but this surely didn't happen. As time went on, this was further confirmed. More and more celebrities came out in support of marriage equality. Surely that would mean the 'religious right' and their 'values' at least didn't have much clout among young people. By President Obama's second term, during which marriage equality support reached majority, it was clear that the Great Religious Awakening of 2004 simply never was. America, and indeed the rest of the Western world, was increasingly embracing marriage equality all this time, which was

incompatible with the picture of a rising religious right. It was a figment of the media's imagination. It just goes to show how we can collectively imagine and fear something that simply is not really happening.

But here's my theory for the whole phenomenon of the Great Religious Awakening that never was: Same-sex marriage, which wasn't even on most people's political radar in 2000, had emerged as a major election issue for the first time in 2004, due to decisions in its favour by the Massachusetts Supreme Court as well as several Canadian courts. Back then, not many people were passionate supporters of marriage equality, but many more were passionate opponents. The inclusion of ballot initiatives to 'ban gay marriage' naturally brought many opponents of marriage equality to the ballot box who wouldn't have otherwise voted, and most of this population was also likely to vote Republican, giving Bush an

advantage. This, however, did not mean the religious right was on the rise, per se. This was also not able to be repeated even in the 2006 mid-term elections, because even though the majority was still against same-sex marriage, the bans were already in place. Therefore, 'values voters' did not play much of a role in either 2006 or 2008. (The 2004 picture also could not happen in today's climate: the Irish referendum showed that, even where voting is voluntary, more supporters of marriage equality than opponents would turn up.) Meanwhile, there was also a concurrent same-sex marriage debate in Canada, and of course the religious right participated in politics over this issue. In Australia, it was probably more of a case of the progressives simply losing confidence and fearing for the worst, after four consecutive terms of conservative government and a recent defeat at the 1999 Republic Referendum. Note that this phenomenon was not observed in the UK or New Zealand at all, let alone Europe. If it had been real, it would

likely have spread to all countries of similar culture.

Issue Profile: A New Feminism

Feminism has had a long (and proud) history of improving the lives of women. Once upon a time, women could not vote or receive equal education. First wave feminism changed that. Still, women did not have equal rights in employment, and many were fired upon marriage. Second wave feminism changed that. Third wave feminism then emphasized women's right to 'have it all' - a career and a family. Many modern women were living this dream, by the end of the 20th century.

For a while, it seemed that feminism had achieved everything and was ready to be historicised, at least in the West. I still remember a few newspaper articles from the mid-2000s, posing the question 'is feminism still relevant now?'. And they certainly had a point: many young women didn't feel that the

feminist struggle was relevant to their lives anymore, and many even refused to identify as feminist, due to the term's association with several radical figures in the 20th century. Feminism just wasn't on most people's cultural radar, male or female.

But by the early 2010s, feminism had another rebirth. Maybe it was the internet 'narrowcasting' culture enabling the rise of a new generation of feminist media. Maybe it was the inspiration of a new generation of feminist politicians, like US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard. Maybe it was the general renewed interest in civil rights. But things changed, bit by bit. At first, it was not very apparent. There were criticisms of popular culture figures being 'anti-feminist' every now and then. I remember singers and their lyrics being a popular target for this crowd, something I brushed aside as nonsense (I don't believe in political

correctness). A few years into this, I noticed that politicians and celebrities alike started to be regularly asked the question 'are you a feminist'. Most were quite non-committal about this in the early 2010s, but by the middle of the decade, firm responses in favour of feminism had become more common. Feminism has become a popular topic of conversation in the mainstream, in a way I have never seen before in my lifetime.

In general, I do welcome the rise of feminism, as part of the civil rights movement. However, I do have my concerns about respect for the freedom of conscience. For personal reasons, I just cannot bring myself to support affirmative action. I have come under fire from feminists for this. I have also found that the attitude that abortion is absolutely a woman's right and therefore doctors should not be able to refuse has become increasingly common. This is another view I cannot support, due to my

religious beliefs. While I welcome the new feminism, I also live in fear that it will exclude people like myself. I want to see women being equal as much as any other feminist, but I have other beliefs too. For my part, I use my blogs and opinion pieces to promote my own brand of feminism.

For all but two years during 2003-2016, I was a university student. This gave me another perspective on the rise of feminism. During the 2000s, it would be uncommon for students, male or female, to ever discuss feminism. I actually recall having ZERO discussion on the matter with my university colleagues during that time. Surely, it was a common topic for the student union publication to address, but it did not seem to be popular among everyday university students. Today, the situation is very different. Not only is feminism a popular topic of discussion across the board, the discussion is

often very in-depth, taking in issues such as intersectionality, privilege and trans feminism.

As with every rebirth of every movement, things are not always going to be the same as they were in the previous waves. The issue of trans inclusion is perhaps the biggest point of difference between today's young feminists and feminists of older generations. It used to be common among second wave feminists to exclude trans people or even put them up for ridicule, and other feminist were generally silent about this sort of behaviour back then. But in today's LGBT friendly world of progressive activism, this just cannot stand. Therefore, in recent years, young feminists have bravely taken up the cause of trans inclusion against their older sisters, and this has caused plenty of clashes. Today's young feminists are not afraid of controversy and will not bow down to injustice, even if it comes from 'feminist elders'. Another point of

difference is that men are allowed, indeed encouraged, to identify as feminists and do their part. In the past, men were often 'not allowed' to identify as feminists, simply because they were men and did not have the experience of women in society. But luckily, today's feminists have seen that the divisive approach is neither good for women nor for society in general. When Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau came out as a feminist, many of my feminist friends cheered him on. More recently, Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull saying that he, too, was a feminist was similarly welcomed by the feminist community. I see all of this as the necessary evolution of feminism into a more mature movement, growing up from an exclusive and divisive 'teenage phase' to a more wholesome 'young adult' phase.

Issue Profile: Civil Rights and Marriage Equality

I believe the 2010s will be remembered as a great step forward for civil rights in general. The 2000s will likely not have such a great reputation, but in my opinion, it was where it all started. My view of this history is of course also the backbone of my Princess's Spirit Trilogy novels.

Some background first. The 1980s and 1990s were more 'materialistic' decades, where, for many people, making money took priority over civil rights. In these decades, it was known that even many young people voted for conservative parties, for their perceived economic benefit. I have even heard of anecdotes from party volunteers at polling booths at US elections in the 1980s, where the

Democratic volunteers would dismay if young people turned up at a high rate.

Things started to change in the 2000s. In 2003, the War In Iraq inspired an anti-war protest movement, the size of which was not seen in decades. When, in 2016, a British government inquiry found against the justification of the war, many people who were bitterly opposed to the war, myself included, felt vindicated. In the 2004 US elections, while every age group above 30 clearly showed a majority voting Republican, a clear majority of under-30s voted Democratic. Some commentators pointed out to a new generation, 'generation Y' or the 'millennials', starting to enter the voting population meant that young people's priorities had changed. Others were even more optimistic, saying that in just one decade's time there would be much progress on issues such as marriage equality. They turned out to be right, even though in 2004 most people were

sceptical, seeing that more than 30 states had just voted to 'ban gay marriage'.

The effects of this change in priorities for younger voters continued to be felt throughout the next decade. In 2008, young people voted in huge numbers for Presidential candidate Barack Obama, first in Democratic primaries, then in the general election, pulling off a victory that seemed unlikely at both levels just one year previously. The chance to make history by electing the first black president was an attractive prospect for many, but even more attractive was his promise of 'hope and change'. By the 2010s, young voters' preoccupation with civil rights issues continued to change politics. By 2016, it was acknowledged by many commentators that the anti-marriage-equality Republican party now faced a demographic crisis in terms of votes, simply because it turned off too many young people and minorities. Meanwhile, in the

Australian election of the same year, a survey of young voters found that their top three priorities were asylum seeker rights, marriage equality and climate change action. Some commentators even argued that perhaps we cannot get young people to care about issues like the economy without first resolving the aforementioned issues.

The political landscape also appears to be undergoing a historic shift, with the 'left' becoming increasingly left on both social and economic issues. As of 2016, many observers have pointed out that the current platforms of the centre-left parties in the US, UK and Australia are the furthest to the left they had been for a while, perhaps since the rise of conservatism in the 1980s. On the other hand, libertarianism is increasingly replacing conservatism as the dominant ideology of young people on the right. For example, young supporters of right-wing parties generally have

no problem with marriage equality or racial issues, and the younger generation of pro-lifers often don't support actually making laws to punish abortion out of existence. This has not been picked up generally by the media yet, but I can sense that it is definitely happening in my generation. One of the main effects of this shift is that the younger generation is more anti-war than ever before. For example, when former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott tried to drum up patriotism and fear to use the 'ISIS and terrorism' issue to improve his poor position in the opinion polls, there was barely an effect. Commentators wondered why this 'old trick' no longer worked. But look closer at the age group breakdowns in the polls, and you will see that there was indeed a surge of support for the government among those over 60. It was just cancelled out by the massive drop in support in under-35s. Young people were turned off massively. This makes sense, as both new-left socialism and libertarianism are generally anti-war.

Looking back, many of the civil rights battles of the 2010s wave actually started in the 2000s or even the 1990s. Most symbolic of the new wave of civil rights struggle in the 2000s and the 2010s was the issue of marriage equality for gay and lesbian couples. The issue first came to political prominence in 1993, when a lesbian couple sued in Hawaii for marriage-like benefits. However, in the 1990s, the vast majority of people were decidedly against the idea - an opinion poll in 1996 found only 17% support across the US. The Netherlands, on the other hand, soon became the first country to legalise marriage equality, which came into effect in 2001. By 2003-4, when the issue first received substantial political support in the English-speaking world, over 30% of the US, UK and Australia now supported marriage equality, but still, in November 2004, more than 30 US states simultaneously passed by referendum bans on state recognition of same-sex

marriages. 'Progressives' and 'conservatives' started to argue about the issue seriously, with the same old arguments to be repeated over and over again throughout the next decade and more. (I played my part by writing a book addressed specifically to conservatives and put the case for marriage equality by addressing every major conservative argument I could find.)

Early successes with marriage equality often came with fears the legislation may be overturned in the future, and same-sex couples either chose to marry at the first instance they are able to, or would rather wait until the legislation is settled. Canada passed marriage equality in 2005, but the Liberal government lost office soon after. Luckily, the next parliament attempted to re-open the issue but did not have enough numbers to do so. Similarly, there was concern about whether the election of a conservative government in Spain

in 2009 would lead to a re-examination of the issue. Luckily, this too had not come to pass. On the other hand, although the Californian Supreme Court legalised marriage equality in mid-2008, a referendum (the famous Proposition 8 or 'Prop 8') invalidated this by November. Existing marriages continued to be valid, but no more same-sex marriages could be performed until the ban was revoked by the US Supreme Court in 2013. I still remember the dismay at reading the news that Californian authorities had stopped issuing marriage licences to same-sex couples that day in early November 2008. On the other hand, the fact that this happened in California, centre of the global entertainment industry, meant that many celebrities came out in support of marriage equality and against 'Prop 8'. The high profile 'No H8' photography campaign, in which celebrities were photographed with their mouths taped as protest, even lasted for quite a few years.

As a new decade arrived, things began to look better. By 2012, both UK Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and US President Barack Obama had announced their support for marriage equality, although things would still take a few years to change on both sides of the Atlantic. On the other hand, many people were baffled by then Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard's unwillingness to support marriage equality, especially as she was an atheist and otherwise socially progressive. She later explained that she was affected by anti-marriage attitudes prevalent amongst 1980s feminists (she changed her position in 2015). Her explanation actually led to quite a few older-generation gay and lesbian people to come out and suggest that she had a point. I don't have figures to prove this, but in my own experience, marriage equality is a generational thing, and even young heterosexuals are actually more likely than older gay and lesbian

people to support and be passionate about marriage equality.

As time went on, the support for marriage equality continued to grow. Before 2012, the pro-equality side lost every referendum ever held on the subject. The November 2012 successes in Maryland and Washington state, both by 52-48, were groundbreaking enough. But the 2015 Irish referendum, with its 62% approval rate, surely was much better. By then, polls had also generally found majority support across the US. By 2016, polls in Northern Ireland and Australia, the only Western English-speaking countries to remain without marriage equality, found 70% support in each country (polls generally ceased to be conducted in the other countries after marriage equality was legalised). Furthermore, passion for the issue continues to grow, with a poll conducted during the 2016 Australian elections finding that 49% of Australians were 'strongly opposed to the

idea of marriage between only a man and a woman', making marriage equality the second most passionately supported election issue overall. This matches my own experience. For a decade, my passion for marriage equality was generally a thing my friends couldn't understand. They were generally fine with it, but couldn't understand the fuss. But more recently, I have met more and more people who are equally as passionate about this cause as I am.

Issue Profile: From Reality TV to YouTube Personalities

The early years of the new millennium were the golden years for reality TV. The concept of reality television, in which every day, real life people are the stars of television shows rather than the same old cultural elites, was probably nothing new, but had only become a genre in and of itself during this period. Its impact on culture was massive. The popular novel series The Hunger Games was partially inspired by the genre. Even national elections have been compared to reality TV, although usually unflatteringly. Looking back, it appears this was a transitional phase, between a past when selected cultural elites dominated the cultural conversation, and a future where the culture and its creation are more thoroughly democratised. Reality television bridged that gap, and therefore deserves a special place in our cultural history, even though it did have

many critiques who essentially labelled it as rubbish.

Reality TV was big business at the turn of the millennium, and there were shows to cater to every competitive activity you can think of. The fact that many people (including myself) spent hours discussing yesterday's reality show(s) with friends, and the fact that you would commonly hear other people on the train or the bus talking about reality TV demonstrate their popularity during this period. Magazines would also commonly have reality TV 'specials', usually featuring profiles and interviews with contestants. The most popular shows included:

-The Big Brother series: two dozen or so contestants are pre-selected and placed in a house, where they have to live with each other as well as complete assigned tasks. The audience gets to vote to save or evict 'housemates' every week, and the last

remaining is the winner. It is pretty much a popularity contest.

-The Idol franchise: includes worldwide versions such as American Idol, Canadian Idol, Australian Idol, NZ Idol and Pop Idol (UK). It is essentially a singing competition, where the contestants first get quickly cut down to 12 or 13, then they perform songs of an assigned genre each week on stage. Each week, the contestant with the least votes is eliminated, until the grand final.

-The X-Factor, The Voice: also singing competitions, somewhat like Idol, but with also the involvement of 'coaches'.

-PopStars, Fame Academy (UK): other singing competitions

-The Amazing Race: where a dozen or so teams of two compete in a 'race around the world', visiting a different country and performing tasks related to that country's culture on each week of the show. There is no voting on this show; each week, the team that completed the

tasks last is usually eliminated, and the final three teams get to compete in the final week for the prize money.

-Masterchef: a cooking-based reality TV competition.

-Wipeout: a sports and action based reality TV competition.

-The Block (Australia): a renovation and interior design based reality TV competition.

The appeal of reality TV was multifold. Firstly, everyday people, not polished by the cultural elite, people with backgrounds similar to most of us, were the stars of the show. With every season of these shows, you get a brand new batch of these people, people who had never been on TV before. Shows like American Idol showcased their contestants' background and life extensively, and it was undoubtedly part of the appeal, for many people who had become

sick and tired of the fakeness of the cultural elites. Secondly, reality TV also sometimes included characters who were more 'special' than the cultural elite's conservative attitudes would embrace, for example people who were geeks, people who had unique beliefs, and people who were transgendered. Also, while TV was still king in the 2000s, the emerging internet technology had already begun changing things. People began demanding that they be able to connect with their favourite shows, musicians, celebrities and journalists like never before. Reality TV would benefit uniquely from this, due to both its characters being real, and its course being unscripted. The people discussing in the internet forums were a representation of the people who were going to vote to save or eliminate contestants, and thus shape the course of the show. To get an idea of how things are likely to proceed, the forums were where you went. With shows like Idol and Big Brother, forum discussions were not just sources for speculation about the

future, they were sources for educated guesses, which mostly turn out to be spot on.

Reality TV was also an important cultural game-changer for another reason: it showed that everyday people could acquire some of the 'characteristics' previously reserved for elite celebrities. People could look up to them, they could gain a following, and they could even participate in the cultural conversation. Many more traditional commentators lamented the loss of distinction between celebrities and everyday people, complaining how people were 'becoming famous for nothing'. The complaint that people were 'becoming famous for nothing' was probably, in some cases, related to the fact that some reality TV characters who didn't have the best talent nevertheless acquired huge followings. In the most extreme cases, this included for example Idol rejects who were shown the door at their audition, those who the judges didn't even let pass the

first gate. This infuriated many people time and again, for reasons I probably will never understand. People look up to others for different reasons, courage, uniqueness, and just being 'real' being several important reasons. People can be valuable for different reasons, and if you don't understand it, at least it's not your place to judge. I personally have cheered on many 'underdogs' in Idol over time, and whilst I recognised that there were probably other better singers, personality and other values also counted in my book. The fact that many others cheered for the same 'underdogs', often getting them into the top four, showed that many people saw the same things.

The popularity of reality TV appears to have somewhat decreased in recent years (mid 2010s). I guess in a world where the internet already offers many real-life personas, especially in the form of online video icons on sites like YouTube, there is now less need for

reality TV. For example, the proliferation of independent musicians on YouTube has reduced the need for a show like American Idol, which finally came to a close earlier this year (2016).

Issue Profile: Internet Based Activism

From around the late 2000s onwards, it has been common to use the internet to engage in political activism. Common activities include:

-Sharing news and opinion: the internet is the most comprehensive and up-to-date source of news and opinion for a variety of activist causes. The narrowcasting nature of the internet also means that, for every major cause, there are dedicated websites and blogs to provide news and opinion. If your friend is also passionate about the same cause, you can also send them the link to any major news or interesting opinion.

-Signing online petitions: anyone can set up online petitions easily with several websites dedicated to this purpose. Alternatively,

petitions can be set up by activist groups or political parties. Signing a petition usually means leaving your name and email or phone number (as per the website's instructions), and the signatures are sometimes actually delivered to parliament or congress.

-Sharing social media content: social networks like Facebook and Twitter have a handy share function, and if you agree with something from a political page, you can share it on your timeline with your friends to show your support. Seeing your friends support something can be an encouragement for you to think about the issue too.

-Donating online: in the new era of politics, political parties and activist groups often use the internet to collect small amounts of donations (e.g. five dollars) because it's easy to donate this way using your credit card. In turn,

this convenience means a large number of people may end up donating, with their small sums adding to a substantial amount to spend on advertising.

Issue Profile: Music, TV and Movies in the 2000s and 2010s

Popular music can either be said to have entered a new phase in the early 21st century. Or you can say that nothing much had happened in this period, depending on your perspective. The availability of digital music is the game changer here, either way.

The availability of digital music means that music never goes out of circulation. Unlike just two decades ago, nowadays you can download music from the 1960s, for example, if that is your taste. People are therefore no longer as confined to the music of their times as in other times in history. Moreover, the proliferation of independent artists, enabled by the digital music revolution, also allows a much broader range of tastes to be catered to.

Thus, there is no one single dominant style of music for these two decades. Electronic Dance Music (EDM) is probably the only 'new' genre to emerge in the 2010s, but even this has roots in techno and dance music of the 1990s and earlier. Otherwise, pop, rock, hip-hop and country continue to be the most popular genres of music, as in the 1980s and 1990s. Also, besides the increasing influence of EDM, there seem to be no reliable characteristics to differentiate music from the 1990s, 2000s or the 2010s. The 'market share' of each type of music on top 40 radio however seems to have varied slightly, for example there are definitely fewer love ballads on radio nowadays than in the 1990s.

As previously mentioned, reality TV is the main 'new' television genre in the 2000s, and its popularity continued into the 2010s, despite perhaps slightly declining. The other big change was that TV shows have become more likely to

showcase gay and lesbian characters and storylines. Shows like Modern Family and Glee are most famed for doing so (it is in fact the core of these shows), but many other shows have done so too. Such characters and storylines were very uncommon in the 1990s and the early 2000s.

Regarding movies, the main change from previous decades was the introduction of 3D movies, where movie-goers wear 3D glasses and can see things in a slightly three-dimensional way. This became popular towards the end of the 2000s. Another development was the increasing number of movie series based on popular young adult book series, with the Harry Potter series (7 books about a wizarding school), the Twilight series (4 books about a vampire love story) and the Hunger Games series (3 books about a future dystopia) being the most popular among many more. In each case, the producers have decided to make

the last book into two movies, in order to extend the franchise for another year. It has been anecdotally claimed that these movies have encouraged young people to take up reading.

Issue Profile: Social Justice Warriors vs Libertarians

The recent (mid 2010s) phenomenon of Social Justice Warriors (SJWs) has changed the cultural and political landscape dramatically. The term Social Justice Warrior only came into widespread use over the past few years. Sometimes it is used as a word of derision by their opponents, but often the term is used by the people described themselves. This term will be used here in a neutral sense.

Social Justice Warriors are people who take every opportunity to 'fight against' bigotry, including racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia and disability discrimination, usually but not limited to using their words online to shut down bigots. Engaging in wars of words with 'bigots' are their most common activity, and other common activities include

signing petitions (usually online), participating in demonstrations, petitioning for 'bigoted' people to be removed from positions of power, including both government and business positions, and sharing online posts that expose 'bigots'. Social Justice Warriors often have an attitude of looking for bigotry everywhere they go, and some people have observed that the commonly agreed-to 'taboos' in the Social Justice Warrior 'community' have increased over time. Social Justice Warriors, on the other hand, have claimed that various recent social changes, including the US Supreme Court's 2015 decision that all states must have marriage equality, and the recent rise in transgender awareness, is due to their efforts.

Against this backdrop, people who are against 'political correctness' have sought to fight back. Libertarians in particular have claimed that people have the right to freedom of conscience and speech, and SJWs are therefore wrong to

prevent this, something I generally agree with. However, internet sites and groups that claim to fight against the SJWs have often featured lots of casual racist, homophobic and transphobic speech. It seems that, to protect the right of freedom of speech, some people feel that they have to use it in a way contrary to what the SJWs want, to prove that they have succeeded. This, I really cannot agree with.

Story 2:

The Princess's Spirit Trilogy:

An Early 21st Century Liberty Movement Story

2020 Updated Edition

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The Music in this Book

The music included in Chapters 3, 6, 9, 11 and 19 of this book is available on the original TaraElla albums **LOVE IS ALL AROUND US** and **YOUR LOVE MAKES THE WORLD BEAUTIFUL**.

Visit **www.taraella.com** to get these tracks and other music from TaraElla.

Disclaimer

All events described within or in relation to Pacificland are fictional. Any resemblance to real events are coincidental.

While effort has been made to describe accurately the international historical events referenced in the book, the accuracy of such events described cannot be guaranteed.

Preface (2020 Edition)

This book is about the spirit of the early 21st century. It contains entirely fictional characters in an entirely fictional setting, and there are many elements of fantasy in the story, but it aimed to capture something real: the social and political coming of age of the Millennial generation (born around 1980-1996), and the major world events that marked the start of political consciousness for this generation.

This book is also about something else: the divergent path the lays ahead of us, and the recent history that has brought us here. The path of liberty for all vs the path of an artificially engineered society. At the beginning of the story (i.e. in the first book of the trilogy, as it was originally published), i.e. in the early 2000s, an authoritarian conservatism was dominant in the politics of the Western world. The two most characteristic events of this authoritarian conservatism were the launch of the Iraq War by the US and her allies, despite widespread domestic opposition in many countries ('not in my name, not with my taxes'); and the push to stop any further progress on the issue of marriage equality for gay couples. Furthermore, conservative politicians during this era often criticized multiple aspects of youth culture, from video games, to hip-hop music, to fashion. It is in this context that the majority of young people turned against the political establishment, and sought a more liberal politics ('more

liberal' is used here as a big-tent, meaning everything from progressivism to libertarianism, to a more 'modern' and libertarian conservatism).

However, a fork in the road ahead appeared around the early 2010s. In fact, I think that this development may have been bubbling under the surface for even longer, as was illustrated in this book. The Millennials soon became divided between those who favour more liberty, and those who favour artificial social engineering in the name of 'social justice'. Even more ironically, just when some conservatives began to embrace liberty and end their opposition to things like gay marriage, the so-called 'left' began to pick up authoritarian elements, roughly cancelling out the progress of liberty on the right. In the book, Change The Era (CTE) represents the authoritarian-left camp. I didn't talk much about the ideology of CTE, because I thought that it might distract from the story, and also because at the time of writing (2015-16) it still wasn't entirely clear what direction the 'new authoritarians' were heading into. However, some of my more recent (and soon to the published) work, which deals with ideologies like critical theory, conflict theory and postmodernism, as well as the 'legacy' of the radical 1960s, should shed some light.

The book has the kind of ending that I personally wish to see: mass awakening that liberty is the way to go; that authoritarian movements promising 'progressive change' actually lead to nowhere. Of course, in the real world, the issue didn't actually get resolved in 2016, far from it. In fact, the polarization between libertarians (in a big-tent sense) and authoritarians only got worse since the election of US President Donald Trump in late 2016. The new authoritarian-left appears to have made huge gains since Trump's election, by recruiting disappointed and angry young people everywhere. In the book, I hinted that this might happen, by hinting that CTE would actually prefer to have the conservatives in power, which would suit their longer term goals. Little did I know that, in real life, something similar to that was about to happen.

Overall, the narrative in this book represents one kind of political coming of age of the Millennial generation in the early 21st century. Angelle and her friends set out to fight an authoritarian establishment, and bring about a new world of liberty. But along the way, a substantial part of her generation were tempted by authoritarianism and its promises of utopia, which greatly complicated the long march towards freedom. I sincerely hope that, like Angelle and her friends, real life Millennial freedom fighters will find a happy ending after all.

Chapter 1

Angelle's New Era

Angelle had just finished her breakfast. As she turned away from the table and started walking back to her room, she took a glance at the calendar. The thought that it was already the 16th of February 2003 suddenly hit her. It's been more than six weeks since her self promised new era had arrived. She needed to do more to prepare for this important year, the foundational year of the great new era.

2003 was going to be a big year for Angelle. It was the beginning of her 'development' as an aspiring Cultural Royal, one of the group of people elected to help shape Pacificland's future, and to many, one of the highest honours that a Pacificland citizen can have. This year, like most other aspiring cultural princes and princesses of Pacificland turning 14, she

would start at the Royal College of Pacificland, which she gained admission to last year, to the celebration of family and friends. Of course, going to Royal College was itself a great thing, and most graduates are set for life in terms of jobs and careers. But that was not Angelle's real goal, not that she had told anyone else about her grander plan. Many great lords and kings, (and maybe one day even a queen?), had their start at the Royal College, and then got elected as a Cultural Royal, something that Royal College students have a great advantage in, as per tradition.

Being someone historical. Contributing to the history of Pacificland, and hence potentially all humankind too. It's the dream of every idealist. It was certainly the dream of Angelle's mother, Anne, when she was young. She was not even a student at Royal College, and yet she became one of the few who were popularly elected to the Heirs Council, a council for up-and-coming

Cultural Royals, running on a friend's friend's ticket. Regrettably, she only ever made it that far. It wasn't easy to get further without the proper connections, the proper titles, the proper prestige. Her father was always much more practical. He was brought up with the knowledge that his heritage wasn't of sufficient prestige to carry him anywhere far, and so focussed his efforts on the economic improvement of his house. Regrettably, too, all that went up in smoke during the major stock market crash of 1997.

Angelle is determined to follow her mother's dreams, and this time she is determined to find success. 'The second generation makes it,' she has often told herself. Surely she still has plenty of disadvantages to overcome. A less than prestigious background and limited resources due to the family's partial financial ruin for one. But it's the 21st century, a time when technology levels the playing field in

everything, right? In her parents' time people had to cultivate vast information networks to be able to have a grasp on developments from every corner of the world. But thanks to a development called the internet, even well-informed commoners can now know more about the current world than some old lords. In a few years' time, when everyone moves to broadband internet, and the promise of 'Web 2.0' comes true, things will get even better. (Angelle didn't exactly know what 'Web 2.0' meant, but she was sure it was going to be important.)

Technology isn't only good for gathering information either. It could also become a great tool used to overcome hard limits imposed by conventional systems. Just a few days ago she read in the papers that a band of musicians banished by their patron two years ago nevertheless were still making quite a fortune using technology. They recorded their music in

a garage with the assistance of computers, and distributed their music to their already well developed fan base via the internet. Just a few more years ago, any band of musicians banished by their patrons would find themselves limited to playing for extremely small audiences, almost begging for a living. Many such bands would have to become boring ceremony bands, playing the same tired old stuff at every wedding they go to. With the right patrons musicians get to be known and popular around the world, playing to filled concert halls of thousands of people everywhere they go. Without a patron, life gets very difficult. But even here, things are changing.

Besides technology and the levelling playing field, there is something else in Angelle's favour too, she believes. Recent history has shown that she has a talent for bringing people together to work as a team. This mostly refers

to the teams of 'leftovers' she has often been able to assemble, and become leader of, for things such as school projects or local karaoke competitions. From the outside, Angelle often just looked like one of the smarter social outcasts or 'leftovers' who therefore had to do this work. But Angelle knew that if she actively begged she would have been allowed to join a team before being 'left over'. It's just that following another leader was not how she was designed to work. This year, she was going to start her new era by assembling her team, doing what she does best. But this time it was not going to be a 'leftover' team. She was going to actively reach out to build this dream team. A team that will help her overcome all sorts of disadvantages, and most importantly of all, the connection and prestige disadvantage.

She would need to get to work soon. The new era kicks off. Angelle isn't entirely sure whether she is really ready, but she has waited her

entire life for this. "Bring it on," she thought. "I'm ready."

Chapter 2
The Royal College

From the outside, the Royal College looked just like any ordinary, gray building, like all the other ones found in this part of town. But as Angelle stepped into its doors into the foyer, the place suddenly seemed much older, much more classical. For unlike the building itself, which had only about 50 years of history, the interiors were hundreds of years old. The bricks, the columns, and even the furniture, they were all disassembled from the previous Royal College building in Western Europe and shipped here to be reassembled. Beyond the foyer was the inner courtyard. It too looked classically European, for it was a replica of the front garden of the old Royal College.

Angelle felt awkward walking in a long robe, especially since it was in red, blue and gold, her

family's house colours. Not to mention the warm weather today made things even worse. Her right arm is also getting tired from carrying the family flag, a large flag of red, blue and gold again, hoisted on a golden flagstaff. It won't be like this every day though, because students are only required to wear their royal robes and carry their family flags on Welcome Day and other special occasions. In front of her, Angelle could see a sea of colours, stretching as far as the eyes can see. The colours of every robe, representing the family colours of each house, was at least slight different, just like no two family flags were the same. Well, except for those who are siblings or cousins, of course.

Following the stream of people in front of her, Angelle stepped into the grand doors of the lobby. The lobby was a moderately small chamber, with two staircases on the left and right leading upstairs, and another set of big, grand doors at the end, leading to the inner

courtyard, which appeared to be deserted at the moment. Instead, everyone appeared to be streaming up the staircases. In front of the staircases, there was a sign pointing houses A-M to the left staircase, and houses N-Z to the right one, so Angelle knew clearly where she had to go.

Once on the upper floor, Angelle could see a long corridor with the sign 'Discussion Rooms', with many rooms on both sides. But this was not where the people were going today. Instead, they passed into a place called the 'Allies Living Quarters', which featured a comfortable lounge with sofas and a small kitchen, and two lifts leading to 'Floors 3-25'. But this wasn't their destination either. Angelle could now see that they were actually heading for the Great Hall, its grand entrance could now be seen at the end of the lounge of the living quarters.

Once inside, Angelle could see that the Great Hall really does live up to its name. In fact, it looked like an even larger version of the Pacificland National Opera House, itself a replica of the Opera House in Paris. There was a sea of red chairs, with signs carrying the letters of the alphabet standing in front of every few rows. Angelle knew she had to find the letter J. Once there, she noticed that each chair had a person's name and a house name on it. After searching for some time, she found the one labelled 'Angelle, Easterner', and sat down. At the back of each seat she noticed a familiar slot. Thanks to her having watched Heirs Council meetings on television before, she knew this was the place to put the house family flag.

After what felt like forever, a tall, old man walked onto the stage. He was dressed in a robe that had five colours, red, yellow, green,

blue and purple. Angelle immediately recognised these as the school colours of Royal College.

"Welcome students," he said.

"Welcome to the Royal College, for the new students. For the old ones, it's welcome back for another year. For those who still don't know me, I am Holland Northhome, Principle of this College. I know it may be boring for the old students, but for the benefit of the new students, I'm going to have to give the annual introductory talk again.

"Royal College is a very old tradition indeed. For the last 422 years, it has provided a great education to future royals around the world, from the oldest campus back in Northern Europe, where the college was founded, to our

second campus in Western Europe, and finally, in the last half a century, in this rather new campus.

"Young royals are the future of our society. As such, we have a duty to provide you with the best education, so that you can learn from our history, and have the capacity to think critically in facing the future, a future of uncertainties, a future where new challenges arise with every generation. For hundreds of years, our students have gone on to become important thinkers, leaders, and even in some cases, revolutionaries, the best example of which was during the movement to introduce a popular vote of the King, or a similar position, often called the President or Prime Minister, in many kingdoms.

"Back in Europe, the College used to provide education only for the allied kingdoms of

Europe and North America. Today, the great tradition of alliances amongst these houses is still represented here, most notably in the Allies Living Quarters. However, after the humanity crisis of the Second World War, we could no longer continue this boundary of exclusion. Therefore, since the College moved here to Pacificland, we have also welcomed the guest houses, those from places as varied as the Asia and the vast continent of Africa. These houses are represented in the Guest Living Quarters, on the other side of this building.

"Now, it's time for another great tradition of the College. I will call upon each student, in alphabetical order according to the name of their House, to come up on stage and be officially enrolled as a student at the Royal College. Each student will also be given their timetables. Every enrolment will be photographed by our professional photographer, and the photos will be given to

you next week. Now let us begin. Miss Abigail of House Acadia!

Angelle felt a bit nervous, but was also a bit excited. After all, this was considered a rite of passage for all aspiring royals.

After what felt like an eternity, she finally heard her name being called. "Miss Angelle of Easterner!"

Angelle walked on stage, lifting her head up high, trying her best to smile and look confident. "If you can't even handle this, how can you achieve your dreams in life," she told herself.

Once on stage, the process was quite simple, surprisingly. All she had to do was to sign her

name on a piece of paper, and receive her timetables from Principle Holland. It was all over within three minutes.

Chapter 3

The Princess Spirit Society

It is already 3am in the morning, but Angelle still cannot sleep. Tomorrow is Societies Day at the Royal College, and it is an opportunity to start building her future that she just cannot give up or mess up. On Socieities Day, the two hundred or so clubs, or Societies, as they are officially known as, are invited to set up stalls in the Inner Courtyard and Outer Courtyard of the college to recruit new members, and will be provided material to do so free of charge. New Societies can also be registered on that day, and start collecting members immediately. In fact, half of the Inner Courtyard is reserved for new Societies each year. It really is a great opportunity to make friends, and look like a leader. Trouble is, Angelle still doesn't know what Society to start. The list of Societies she received yesterday looks like it has every

conceivable Society there already. What more could she add?

Angelle decided to get up and write a song. She found that sometimes that can help.

"Listen to My Heart

What they tell you is just so confusing

Sometimes you don't know what to do

And in this world there are so many crossroads

Which path should I go down

Sometimes I wonder why some cling onto

Walls that only make

Their own lives harder than how it should be

Let them go and we'll have freedom

I'll just listen to my heart

Live by doing what feels right

What really makes my life better

Should be the way to go

There are many stupid rules

But they don't do any good

Why should we be bothered with them

When we should know better

Time resolves all things

But at what cost

For me, will it be too late

Have you asked

I'll just listen to my heart

Live by doing what feels right

What really makes my life better

Should be the way to go"

As she reached below her pillow, Angelle noticed that a book was there. She remembered that it was 'The Princess Spirit', the book she was reading just before she went to bed, the book she would read before any important 'battle' in her life. When she was young, her mom gave her this book. Inside there were 20 lessons for young princesses, which she took to heart. When she becomes a Cultural Princess, she will lead by example, fulfilling the ideals in the book, she had promised herself since then. "Yes, this would be

her great idea. Tomorrow, she would go to Royal College to start the Princess Spirit Society," she thought. She could now sleep, knowing what to do finally.

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As she walked into Royal College today, Angelle could see that people were already setting up stalls in the Outer Courtyard. As she stepped inside the College building, she could see a long line that had formed in front of the registration and supplies stall. She joined the line, and fifteen minutes later, she was allocated a stall in the Inner Courtyard, and a set of materials including a few cardboard pieces, crayons in ten different colours, and some blu-tack.

After she got to her stall, the first thing Angelle did was to use different coloured crayons to

write The Princess Spirit Society on the banner located at the top of the stall. A multicoloured title would surely gain more attention, she thought, not to mention that it looked pretty nice. Next, she wrote down the 20 lessons from the book onto the largest piece of cardboard, using every crayon exactly twice, cycling the colours. She then stuck this piece of cardboard on the stall, so everyone walking by could see it. Now that the stall was set up, she just had to wait.

After two hours, she had her first visitor.

"Hi, I'm Jenelle," the tall blonde said as she walked towards the stall. Angelle was excited to finally have a visitor.

"Hi, I'm Angelle, and we are setting up a new society today, the Princess Spirit Society," Angelle said.

"I'm going to have to stop you right there. Who's we? Where are the other people," Jenelle said.

"Well... they are busy... so I'm left to look after this stall, because I'm the president," Angelle said.

"Busy or non-existent? I actually guess non-existent, because I don't think anybody else wants to be a part of the rainbow crayon princess society," Jenelle said.

"It's not about rainbow crayons, you know, it's about a great idea. The Princess Spirit," Angelle said.

"Oh, The Princess Spirit. It sounds like I'm too old for that. And most people here would be too," Jenelle said, and started walking away.

"Don't you want to find out more?" Angelle screamed out.

Angelle almost cried. But she knew she had to carry on. It would look bad otherwise. "Those destined for greatness never give up on their dreams. Those who give up were simply never destined for greatness in the first place. Never give up despite the odds," she said to herself. So she pretended to smile, and after a while, was back to normal.

*****

At the end of the day, the names of three other first years, 'Princess Natalie of House Eastpark', 'Princess Jenny of House Gold', and 'Prince Daniel of House Benring', were on the signup sheet. (They literally wrote their names this way.) This was still a start, Angelle thought. Not that Angelle knew a lot about these people yet. They came in a group, all three of them, and they just read the cardboard and put their names on the sheet, and walked away. The next

step was to connect with these people, and see if we can all be friends.

Chapter 4

War Breaks Out

Every day when classes ended for the midday break, the Princess Spirit club, i.e. Angelle, Natalie, Jenny and Daniel would walk together along the corridors and down the staircase, and through the doors outside to the inner courtyard, where they would sit in the warm sunshine and have their lunch. Today, however, the courtyard looked different. There were many people in there, mostly older students from the upper years, and they were holding up banners and chanting loudly. Angelle and her friends walked towards one of those people, and asked him what was going on.

"We are opposed to the War in Western Asia," he said. "You don't like wars, do you? You should sign our petition!"

"What war are you talking about?" Angelle asked.

"The government here in Pacificland will join an international war against a country in the western part of Asia. The war is aggression. We simply wish to tell the King we, the people, don't want the war. Signatures of young future royals like you will help us greatly," he said.

"But why does the King want us to go to war, if the people don't want it?" Angelle asked.

"The reasons are complex, it's all about who looks powerful, but it's just bad for humanity," he explained.

So the King is joining an international war to look powerful? The King of Pacificland needs to do this? Angelle was surprised. Angelle didn't like the idea of war anyway. Princesses shouldn't support wars, she believed. She thought of the Princess Spirit Book again. One rule was to help the less fortunate, and another

was to never wilfully harm others. War seems like something she can't support.

"And what's the reason for the war again, according to those who want it?" Angelle asked.

"I think they say it's about spreading liberty," Jenny said.

"Of course that's what they say. They always say that. But it's about making themselves look good. You know, to some people, a King who leads what looks like a just war, even if it's actually unjust, looks like a hero. It's good for their re-election," the young man explained.

"But bombing people to give them freedom? That doesn't make sense?" Natalie asked.

"Of course it doesn't make sense to you and me. But many people don't think that way. They see a King spreading justice around the world," the young man said.

"But why this country many miles away?" Angelle asked.

"But that's the point. People who are so 'foreign' that they are 'them' and not 'us'. Isn't it?" Natalie said.

"Your friend is very right. So are you going to sign our petition?" the young man asked Angelle again.

Angelle looked at the others, not really knowing what to do.

"My parents never sign anything like this, so I think we shouldn't," Jenny said.

"It's sometimes OK to sign petitions, but you don't want to be associated with certain organisations. It will ruin your future," Natalie offered.

Angelle really felt bad about just walking away now, but she shared similar concerns as her friends.

"Do you represent an organisation?" she asked the man.

"We are the Social Justice Group," he replied.

"And everyone else is part of that too?" she asked.

"Not really. There are many organisations out here today," he replied.

"Does anyone not represent any organisation here?" she asked.

"I think there are some. Most people here represent organisations. But it's OK, if you sign, it doesn't mean you join the organisation," he replied.

Angelle thought for a while.

"I'm sorry, but I think I'll sign a petition not associated with an organisation. They all go to the King anyway, right?" she said.

"I guess you can say that. Nice to meet you then," he said, and they parted.

Angelle and friends searched through the crowd and talked to lots of people, from lots of different organisations.

Finally they found someone who fit their criteria.

"We are not an organisation. We are Freedom Fighters. We fight for freedom," the young man explained. He gave them each a booklet. "Read this. It explains what freedom is, and why you should support freedom too."

"You really don't represent an organisation?" Natalie asked, still a bit sceptical.

"No, we don't. Indeed, our petition has the college letterhead on it, and it has no organisation name anywhere. It would break school rules to add the name of another organisation on documents with the college letterhead," he explained, and let them look at the petition book.

Angelle was satisfied. She decided to sign, and the others did too.

"We just did a good thing, I think," Angelle said.

"Me too, actually," Daniel said.

*****

When she got home, Angelle had a lot to think about. Kings and governments were supposed to look after people, right? Do kings actually join wars just to make themselves look good, at

great cost to humanity? Or is there some other story? Can wars actually spread liberty? But isn't that idea ridiculous?

Thinking deeper, if the King wants to wage a war, where does his authority to do so come from? It's because the people trust him. Where does the money come from? The people again, in the form of taxes, of which her parents paid a lot every year. "I wouldn't want to help pay for a war I don't want and the rest of us don't want either. A real princess doesn’t do that," Angelle thought. But thinking deeper again, there's no choice, really. Taxes have to be paid. But don't we pay taxes for running the country, not for wars miles away? This made Angelle question the virtue, or lack thereof, of the King and the government again. More importantly, she was also now questioning if we really lived in a free country, here in Pacificland. So much for 'spreading liberty' if you don't even have enough at home.

Freedom. What is freedom? And why is it so important, why is this keeping her up at night, and why is this the justification of war? Can wars spread freedom again? She decided to read the Freedom Fighter's booklet. Maybe it will give her some insight.

Chapter 5

The Princess Spirit's First Test

A few days ago, Angelle had spent a whole night reading The Freedom Fighter's Manifesto, the booklet she received a week earlier from a self-proclaimed Freedom Fighter. These few days she couldn't take her mind off what she had read. The booklet talked about many things that had not occurred to her before. The booklet talked about how freedom was good for individuals, families and communities, and was ultimately better than what any good king can provide for his subjects. This is in contradiction to Angelle's upbringing, where she was taught that nations thrive with good kings and fall when they have bad kings. The book also contained interesting quotes from 'freedom thinkers'. "So-called good kings often still do plenty of things detrimental to the welfare of people and families everywhere, like wage wars on innocent people, so they can stay

in power," was one quote that got Angelle thinking really hard. "Freedom is the ultimate protection against bad kings, because even with elections, bad kings can lie to get into power, and use tricky means to stay there forever," was another one.

One chapter of the book was particularly challenging for Angelle, however. It was the chapter on how kings around the world, including so-called good kings, actively oppressed gay and lesbian people and their families. "The so-called duty of good kings to uphold the so-called laws of nature is often really an excuse to impose a certain designed order on humankind, in a fashion often against what nature really is like," the book stated. The statement looked so logical to Angelle, but its implications regarding same-sex couples did not look so easy. "Same-sex couples should be allowed the freedom to marry as they wish, and it will be not only consistent with freedom but

be good for everyone, couples who will have much to contribute to a society where they are loved and respected," was how it was spelt out in the book. What Angelle had learnt, up until now, was that a duty of a good king was to uphold the laws of nature, and people partnering with others of the same-sex was not what nature intended, so good kings had to discourage it. Her family had taught her this, and her previous friends also thought likewise. To support same-sex marriages would also be to go against majority opinion, considering that a poll done last year found that less than 30% of Pacificland's citizens supported the government granting equality to same-sex couples. At least in Pacificland, in 2003, people like Angelle's family and friends are in the majority, clearly, and a good king should know to respect that, she was taught in the first week here at Royal College.

Angelle decided to raise the issue with Natalie.

"What's wrong with gay and lesbian people?" Natalie replied, looking a bit disgusted.

Angelle thought she had gone too far, and decided to retreat a little. "It's just that the majority don't think gay marriages should be accepted. Good kings need to listen to the majority, right?" she offered.

"You really think that's true? That the majority should always rule?" Natalie said.

"It's what they taught us in week one," Angelle replied, a bit unsure now.

"The majority once thought that slavery was right too, you know. That's why we had slaves until less than 200 years ago. People were born or sold into slavery for life, and they lived a life of misery because the majority agreed with it. The majority can be unjust," Natalie said.

"So you support gay marriage?" Angelle asked.

"Of course. These people have difficult enough lives already, and anyone with half a heart

wouldn't want to deny them even basic rights. I would be very sad if I couldn't marry the person I loved. How should they be any different?" Natalie replied.

Angelle thought for a while, and there was silence.

"Come have lunch with me today," Natalie said. "I'll introduce you to my sister."

Natalie was privately offended that Angelle didn't seem very comfortable with gay and lesbian people and same-sex marriages. For her, the struggle is personal. Her older sister, Ashley, is lesbian, and her family had been through a huge struggle with judgemental people everywhere for the past few years. Still, she understood that those who don't yet understand are the majority out there, and only conversation will improve things. "Angelle's not a bad person," she told herself. "Like everyone

else, she's been brainwashed, and she just needs to learn the truth."

The other thing Natalie was worried about was if Angelle's attitude towards gay people may cause difficulties for their friendship group. Daniel is sure to come out as gay in the future, she was certain.

Just a few weeks ago, the lunch hall was a grand sight. Hundreds of round, wooden tables and wooden chairs, in a long hall decorated with dozens of pictures showing the history of the College, really made an impression. But now that Angelle has gotten used to it, it just looked, 'normal'. When she arrived at the lunch hall today, she headed towards the usual corner where her friends would sit, not even thinking twice about how the place looked. But today, there was another reason to be excited. Angelle was excited to meet a more senior student for lunch. Maybe she could learn more

about Royal College, and how to survive it, she thought. As she approached, at one of the round, wooden tables, Natalie was already there, and seated beside her was a slightly older version of her. They do look very alike, Angelle thought.

"Hi Angelle," they both said, as she walked towards the table.

"Angelle, this is Ashley. Ashley, this is Angelle," said Natalie.

"Hi Natalie and Ashley," Angelle said.

"It's your first month here at Royal College?" Ashley asked.

"Yes," Angelle said.

"Are you liking it here?" Ashley asked.

"I think I am starting to like it more, especially with friends like Natalie," Angelle replied.

"You and Natalie, do you hang out together all the time?" Ashley asked.

"Well, almost," Angelle replied.

"We do almost everything together, we even signed an anti-war petition together," Natalie said.

"Last week?" Ashley asked.

"Yes. And it was Angelle's idea. She was also the one who started the Princess Spirit club, you know," Natalie said.

"So you're into the Princess Spirit too?" Ashley asked Angelle.

"You mean, as in the little purple book?" Angelle clarified.

"Of course. Where else?" Ashley replied.

Angelle was pleasantly surprised. She thought nobody else took the Princess Spirit thing seriously.

For the rest of the hour, Angelle and Ashley chatted about the Princess Spirit. Angelle was

happy to finally find somebody who can share it with her.

"You know why the Princess Spirit book was written?" Natalie suddenly asked.

"To teach young ladies to treat the world around them better?" Angelle said.

"Yes, that's one reason. But the author was actually hoping that the next generation of princesses and princes would really take the messages in the book to heart, and overcome the prejudices and hate that have been passed down the generations, prejudices and hate that have plagued even the greatest kings and queens alive," Ashley said, looking a bit sad.

"Anyway, it was nice talking to you, but I have to go now," Ashley said.

"It was surely nice talking to you. I hope we'll meet again," Angelle said.

After Ashley left, Natalie and Angelle started talking again. But a few minutes later, Natalie's face turned serious.

"Angelle, there's something I actually need to tell you," Natalie said.

"What," Angelle asked.

"Ashley actually left because she was sad, and she didn't want you to see it," Natalie said.

"Why?"

"She's actually in love with a girl, and has been upset that not everyone likes it. Her girlfriend has been talking about getting married Canada, where the Prime Minister there has said he will soon allow same-sex marriages. But the families of some of her childhood friends won't allow them to attend," Natalie said.

Angelle fell silent. Ashley looked normal. She had always thought that one must be at least somewhat weird to be gay.

"But..."

"What?"

"But she looked so normal."

"Yes, gay and lesbian people are normal. Everything else is a myth," Natalie said.

Angelle began to cry. She didn't know why. She was confused.

*****

When Angelle got home that evening, she locked herself in her own room, thinking about the day's events.

She took out her now torn copy of the 'purple book' and began reading it all over again. When

she was young, she would read it the way her mother had taught her to. Not that it was the wrong way, but she only applied it narrowly, to her own life and to 'everyday' circumstances. Now she could see that the Princess Spirit was more than that. It was not only a challenge to be a better person, but also a challenge to think different from the generations that have come before, and be better than them. To take care of the less fortunate sometimes means to challenge the majority and the established norms. And if everyone failed to do that, we would be failing in our duty to care, to fight for, and to love everyone. Society had failed people like Ashley, and the established norms and taboos, have kept even good people from seeing the truth. There isn't even enough freedom for people to really follow the way of the Princess Spirit, when it comes to things like standing up against the king and his 'advisers' on stupid wars that hurt people, and when it comes to helping people like Ashley to just have what everyone else takes for granted. No

wonder the Freedom Fighters say there is not nearly enough freedom of conscience in our present world.

Angelle is now a changed person. It will take a few more weeks to fully clarify her new ideas, but there is no going back. She is a new Princess, and she has a new fight.

Chapter 6

Angelle's Big Decision

The inner courtyard is a sea of colour today, as Angelle and her friends entered There's excitement all around, as nominations for Heirs Council open today. Five people have announced that they will be running for Heirs Council so far, and four of them are students at this school. Heirs Council is one of two ways, and the easier way, to become a Cultural Royal. In this case, one has to be both a member of the council and have enough support from the other members to be elected a Cultural Royal. But this is still much easier than running for direct election as an adult citizen. Most people running for Heirs Council would also be expected to be students at Royal College, as the student body here holds half the votes, as per tradition. Red and yellow, deep blue, three shades of green and orange and purple are the respective colours the four candidates have

chosen, and flags and banners of these colours fill up the courtyard today.

Angelle is feeling dizzy because she didn't slept well these past few days, and the loud noises from Heirs Council candidates and their supporters in the inner courtyard today doesn't help either. But for Angelle, she has one big decision to make, and it is all anxiety and no excitement for her. Of course, nobody expects a first year like Angelle to nominate, and to do so without proper reason risks being seen as attention seeking. But as long as one can give a convincingly proper reason, it's also the perfect way to get a profile to prepare for future races, and those who end up with the biggest prizes tend to have big profiles starting early. In other words, it's a huge risk to take, and one that may bring great rewards. She had even talked this over with her mother, who encouraged her to go with her heart. To go with her heart...

"I've made my decision. I'm going to nominate this year," Angelle suddenly said aloud.

Her friends looked shocked.

"Are you alright," Jenny asked, a bit concerned.

"Yes, I am. I mean, I'm actually scared, but I think it's the right thing to do," Angelle said.

"If that's what you want, we're excited for you. But let's talk over it inside," Natalie said.

*****

The conversation continued after they all sat down in the cafeteria.

"So you're really going to do this," Daniel asked, trying to look serious.

"OK. Listen. I know it's a big risk to take, for myself. But I can't just think about myself. Since that day I met your sister, and we had that conversation about the Princess Spirit, I've decided that I must take a stand for it. You know, I started to realise that the Princess Spirit is much bigger than what I thought it was all along, and it's something people should really think about. I need to share this with the world, sooner rather than later," Angelle said.

"So you're standing up for people like my sister now? Good on you!" Natalie said.

"People change, you know. I was misinformed, my apologies," Angelle said.

"But you're going to run on just one book, one idea?" Jenny asked. "Will people take it seriously?"

"Of course the Princess Spirit is just a starting point, and I will have a detailed platform, like

everyone else. We have a few months to get it together," Angelle said.

"I like your enthusiasm, Angelle, but Jenny probably has a point. You know, the Princess Spirit is seen by many as a kid's book, just like Cinderella and all those other fairytales of Princes and Princesses. Many people will not take it as seriously as platforms based in economic theories, religious values or even populism," Natalie said.

Angelle paused to think for a while.

"You're right. The Princess Spirit is just where we want to get to in the end. However, unlike in fairytales, it will not happen magically. I will offer practical solutions to help us get there. For example, I'm also inspired by that freedom stuff, you know, and they have a big platform. I think a lot of it will fit well with the Princess

Spirit. I mean, no wars, no discrimination or hate, letting people be themselves, it all fits. It's all about breaking through the things that trap us, as a society, things that prevent us from realising the Princess Spirit," Angelle said.

"Sounds great. If that's what you're going to do, know that we're behind you," Natalie said.

"Thanks. In fact, you are all welcome to join my team," Angelle said.

"What team?" Daniel asked.

"The Heirs Council team, of course. You run with me, and you may get a seat on the council. Once on the council, you will vote for me as Cultural Royalty in return. Have you heard about that?" Angelle said.

"Wow, that sounds exciting. I'm in," Daniel said.

"I'm in too. I'd like to be your adviser, if you don't mind," Natalie said.

"Sure. I need some advice, and what you've provided me with so far has been great," Angelle said.

"One thing though. You will need ten votes to be Cultural Royalty. You've only got three here," Natalie said.

"Well, once there, we can collect votes, persuade people, right? Especially with a smart adviser like you?" Angelle said.

"Fair point," Natalie said.

"How about you, Jenny," Daniel asked.

"I'll think about it," Jenny said. "I'm just a cautious person. But I'll be supporting you anyway."

*****

They say that before you do something potentially life-changing, you should do a good luck ritual. That's what Angelle believes anyway, and one of her good luck rituals is to listen to this song she has loved for many years. Whenever she listens to it, it seems that everything will be just fine.

"Beauty

Sometimes it's just the rain

And sometimes it's just the sun

Whatever time we all need

Something to cheer us up

It may be just the night sky

Filled with little stars

But for us it can hold

More meaning than a book

We all need those little things

To remind us of what's worth living for

We all need those little things

Just to show us beauty

And in those beautiful things

We can see why life is worth living

It's just a little book

But to me it's the key

To a time when this world

Seemed like a paradise

And with it I can try to

Build the magic again

And for us love can last an eternity

And when I am under a

Dark cloud and the storm

I won't be afraid if

I have those dreams with me

And we'll keep on going

Till the great moments come back

And for me the world always

Is a world of hope

We all need those moments

Just to show us what life is all about

And then we can carry on in those darker periods

So cherish those little beautiful things

And hold onto those great moments

And live the most out of what comes our way"

*****

Angelle and her friends got into a taxi together after classes. Normally they would go home, but today they were all going to the same place, excitedly.

"You want to bring these people home with you today?" Angelle's driver for today asked.

"Not really. But can you please take us to the Registrations Office, on Kings Road?" asked Angelle.

"You know, my job is to take students home, not do this. But... if you're nominating, then

that's... fine with me. So you're nominating? For real?" the driver asked.

"Yes sir," Angelle said.

"You would be the youngest person to nominate in more than a decade, you know?"

"I know, and I'm up for the challenge," Angelle said.

"Good on you. You already have my support. Now let's go," the driver said.

Chapter 7

Purple and Yellow: A Force to be Reckoned With

Angelle and her friends had been campaigning in the inner courtyard every day for a week now, trying to gather supporters. Purple and yellow, a combination of the colour of the cover of the Princess Spirit book and the traditional colour representing freedom fighters, has now joined the many other colour combinations being represented amongst the banners and flags colouring the courtyard. However, the purple and yellow team was still amongst the smallest, and was now being surpassed even by teams that have come on board later. Today, it seems that even the red and brown team, which had only been here for three days, has definitely got bigger than purple and yellow, with its seven members.

"Looks like my team is bigger than yours," Jenelle said, as she approached the a dozen or so people rallying around the purple and yellow banners.

"Really?" Angelle asked.

"Are you blind?" Jenelle said, pointing to the two dozen or so people now standing behind her. Jenelle had gained a 'cool girl' reputation in the past few weeks and the most superficial people are now following her around apparently. "We aren't even running for election and we are twice your size."

"So what? Why don't you run for election then?" Angelle said.

"We don't run for elections because it's only for people who want to waste their time, sitting through boring council meetings. But if we did, we would do a much better job of it than you people, clearly," Jenelle said.

"If you aren't running then you're irrelevant and can be ignored. Goodnight," Natalie said.

"Trying to be smart, right? If you were so smart you wouldn't be this loser's sidekick. But clearly you're just not smart enough, so you're over there instead of over here," Jenelle said.

"Your crew doesn't stand for anything except being selfish and stupid, why would she want to be over there?" Angelle said.

"Did you just call us stupid? Let's go and tell the student media," Jenelle said.

"Just ignore them," Natalie said to Angelle.

*****

That Team Angelle is struggling is actually unsurprising, given that all the other teams are headed by more senior students, who have taken their time to build connections. It would

be unrealistic to expect purple and yellow to be the biggest team here, Angelle thought, but if she wanted to make a real impact, she would have to at least raise her profile a bit more.

"Imagine if only I could get on television. I could be like that guy in California who just got elected," Angelle said.

"Yes, that would be nice, wouldn't it," Natalie said.

"But only rich people with lots of connections can get on there, right," Jenny said.

"Yes, that's true. But that's the beauty of technology. The world is changing, and soon people are not going to need to get on TV to be that popular guy," Mandel, one of the newest members of Team Angelle, said.

"But how?" Angelle asked.

"You know, the internet. The blog thing is getting big these few years. You know, where you have a website you can post to regularly, and people will come back to read it again and again if they love it. It's kind of like having your own TV show. Only that it's text based, of course," Mandel said.

Angelle looked interested.

"I have one actually. I'll show you after classes today if you want," Daniel said.

*****

Angelle and her friends gathered excitedly around a computer in the library. They could only have it for half an hour, since they did not have a prior booking, and even had to queue for half an hour just to get this computer. But it was more than enough time for what Daniel had to show them today. Especially since the

internet connection in the college library is supposedly fifty times faster than what most people have at home. It's called 'broadband internet', apparently.

Daniel's blog looked exciting. It had a background of blue, green and pink, his favourite colours, and even a photo of him that was professionally taken. It had entries posted every week or so, and it told the story of his life.

"Those colours are gay," Mandel said.

"We have decided that homophobia is not OK here," Natalie said.

"I'm not saying he's gay. I'm just saying that the colours don't look good," Mandel said.

"So you're using the word gay to mean bad. We don't do this here, you know," Natalie said.

"OK, let's not argue over this. I'm fine," Daniel said.

Meanwhile, Angelle was too absorbed, studying the blog, to notice the argument.

"As my advisor, would you think something like this would be helpful for me?" Angelle asked Natalie.

"It wouldn't hurt to try. What not do it?" Natalie said.

"I'll show you how to start one. And make it look way better than this one here," Mandel said.

And so they started the blog, Angelle and the Princess Spirit. Of course it had a purple and yellow background, and a photo of Angelle wearing those colours, taken in the inner courtyard a week ago, to commemorate the

start of their campaign. Angelle decided that the first entry should explain her deep connection with the idea of the Princess Spirit, and how she proposed to make it happen, via 'liberty and love', her new signature phrase.

*****

Angelle has been very excited these few days. After monthly efforts of recruiting people to Team Angelle every campaign day in the inner courtyard, Team Angelle was still quite small. In the first month after nominations, when every day was campaign day in the inner courtyard, she had only limited success. Early days, she thought. However, it only became even harder after that month was over, and campaign days were held only once a month. Without the ongoing momentum, people became much less interested. Angelle's blog had also helped a bit too, though not as much as she had hoped, at

least up until now. After more than one year of posting on her blog and promoting it in every way she can, she had only gathered a few thousand readers, and of those, only a dozen or so offered to volunteer for Team Angelle. So with the elections only two months away, Team Angelle had only around fifty volunteers, and a few thousand pledged supporters. Compare that with the front running teams, with thousands of volunteers and millions of pledged supporters. Angelle wasn't going to compete with them, not this time around, but she knew she needed more to make at least an impact.

But now, everything was about to change. One of the editors of a quite well known website had read Angelle's blog, and liked it very much. He has decided to run a story on his website about Angelle, and her blog. Angelle gave him a 'virtual interview' a few days ago, which was nothing more than filling in a questionnaire sent via e-mail, and attaching a few

professionally shot photos with the reply. The story went up today, and to Angelle's pleasant surprise, it had brought in more readers than she ever did on her own.

"I've reached 12,537 readers today," she texted Natalie on her phone.

"Wow!" was the reply she got.

It was still too early to tell what kind of impact this late boost would have, on the level of support she would get going into the election. But still, this was VERY encouraging for Angelle and her team.

Chapter 8
The Debate

A few days have now passed since Angelle's blog became, well, widely known. In the internet vocabulary, one could say that it had gone 'viral', i.e. that it is spreading like a virus. More websites, including even more popular ones, had also featured the blog, and by extension Angelle herself, in these few days, and as a result, she has now had more than 300,000 readers. She was now a 'force to be reckoned with', according to some journalists.

Today, she also received an invitation to debate, from a fairly large, though not front-running team. It was quite the honour, she thought, as it generally meant you are now in the big league. The invitation was sent from a group called 'The Rules Guardians', for a debate to be run at the Royal College after classes next

Monday. Angelle summoned her team for an 'emergency meeting' to discuss this.

"We definitely should accept this, right?" Angelle asked.

"You'd be mad not too. Imagine all the media attention. Debates in the last few months always get media attention," Natalie said.

"I would have to agree," Mandel said.

"And for once, I can agree with him," Daniel said.

"So we're doing it. Does anyone know anything about The Rules Guardians?" Angelle asked.

There was silence.

"I don't think they are that famous. I know that the invitation states that they have over a million supporters, but for some surprising reason, they are not famous. I for one haven't heard of them before," Natalie said.

"So shall we still do it?" Angelle asked.

"Of course. Just go for it anyway. It isn't as if it's a trap or that they are lying, if there's a debate it means that they have the numbers to book it, so the invitation isn't lying. It doesn't matter who they are, either. It only matters that you show the world who you are," Natalie said.

*****

As Angelle was about to prepare for her debate, she realised that there was still one important thing she needed to do. Her family had not been aware of her platform yet, as they had given her some autonomy to figure out the best way to do things, as they put it. Some aspects of the platform may be, to put it mildly, unexpected by her family, and when the debate goes public, it may cause some shock.

Angelle decided to show her mother a copy of the platform. She nervously waited as her mother read it carefully, from cover to cover.

"Well, you know that I don't agree with everything that's in there, but I know you've got to be flexible in the way you bring people together, so I'm going to respect whichever way you go," her mother said.

Angelle was relieved.

"So... can you brief our family on what I'm about to do, in case it's not what they expected?" she asked.

"Yes, I will. We all understand that this is an important start for your career, and you need to bring as many people on board as possible right now."

So that was one more problem solved. One day, Angelle will need to tell her family about how recent events have changed her beliefs, from the bottom of her heart. But for right now, this will do.

*****

The Grand Hall of Royal College was divided into three parts today, Angelle could see as she and her team walked in. The back part of the hall was designated the 'neutral zone', whilst the front part, including the stage, was evenly divided into two, purple and yellow on the left, white and dark blue on the right. Angelle had read about this kind of arrangement in books in the past, but seeing it herself was a whole new experience. Being at the centre of such a debate was another new experience, and on a wholly different level too. Secretly, she felt a bit nervous.

*****

Angelle and her team had been waiting nervously, on their seats in the purple and yellow side of the stage, for about an hour now. The neutral zone was now more than half filled with students waiting to watch the debate, and the purple and yellow side of the audience section had a few familiar faces, mostly friends of people involved in Team Angelle. But it appeared that not only were The Rules Guardians late, but the white and dark blue side of the audience section was also empty. Something looked suspicious, Angelle thought. Or maybe it was only her nerves.

Suddenly, a tall blonde figure dressed in white and dark blue entered from the side of the stage. It was Jenelle.

"So she's The Rules Guardians?" one surprised member of Team Angelle asked quietly. Angelle felt her heart sink.

Jenelle walked towards the microphone.

"Hi everybody, I am Jenelle Lacey, and I'm here to deliver a message on behalf of The Rules Guardians. The Rules Guardians have decided to pull out of this debate at the last minute, I'm sorry to say," she said.

There was an awkward silence in the room.

"The Rules Guardians are normally open to debating with other teams, teams that may share a different viewpoint on various matters. However, as their name says, they are committed to certain values, namely the traditional values that help protect our families, societies and nations. And a last minute reading of the Princess Spirit Team's platform was

found by senior team members to be incompatible with such values. Consistent with their rules of shunning people and organizations who are enemies of their cherished values, the president of The Rules Guardians has decided to pull out of the debate at the last minute, as he cannot in good conscience honour an organization whose values are clearly opposed to the good order of human society. That is all," she said, and walked off the stage.

There was heated discussion amongst the audience now. Angelle could vaguely hear that people were confused about what was actually happening, and the words 'lesbian' and 'gay marriage' were being uttered every now and then.

*****

After school that day, Angelle and her team confronted Jenelle, as she was leaving.

"Are you behind the whole The Rules Guardians thing? You need to be honest," Natalie said.

"No, I'm not a member of any election team, as I've said before. Elections are not for cool people like us anyway. I was just helping them deliver a message," Jenelle said.

"So why did you do that?" Angelle asked.

"You know, The Rules Guardians is about to become the coolest team here, and cool people are attracted to each other," Jenelle said.

"But nobody even knows who The Rules Guardians is," Mandel said.

"Well, not after everyone and their parents gets one of these in their mail," Jenelle said, handing them each a pamphlet. "Goodbye guys."

Angelle read the pamphlet.

"The Rules Guardians is committed to the traditional values that help protect our families, societies and nations, the very values which are under threat from people who think they know better than centuries of history...

"Right now, around the world, our values are under attack. In the past four years, gay marriage has gone from being globally rejected to being legalised in two European countries, one US state and several Canadian provinces, and there will be more to come if we don't act soon enough. In fact, our very own King, here in Pacificland, is leaving his options open, refusing to defend the time-honoured definition of marriage being between a man and a woman...

Angelle suddenly had a realisation. The pamphlet looked and read very much like one

her parents recently received from Senator Jashor, who is running for election to be King of Pacificland against the incumbent King March. One of Jashor's favourite lines of attack against King March was that he had not instructed government departments not to recognise recent same-sex marriage certificates from Canada, instead allowing each department to act on their own conscience. Jashor often pledged to introduce laws to prohibit this from happening, based on similar laws already enacted and enforced by the American and Australian federal governments. Could The Rules Guardians be an extension of Jashor and his team? If so, they had big money behind them, and Team Angelle would be in big trouble.

Chapter 9
Election Day

14 November 2004. One day till election day. One more day of campaigning to do. Today, in the inner courtyard, every team will try their best to secure every last bit of support. Passions will clash. There will be no peace today.

"I have a philosophical question for you. Since you people don't even support tough action against those who threaten our way of life, do you actually stand for anything? Or are you just crazy pacifists who will let us all bow in front of evil, doing nothing about it?" Jenelle said.

"First of all..." Natalie began.

"Oops, I forgot you were all talk and no action. You know, in a war there's no time to talk, losers," Jenelle said and walked away.

"Honestly, I want this to be over now. It's not like we're going to win. You were just in it to raise some profile, right?" Mandel said.

Angelle felt frustrated. Giving up before it's over is poor form. But she couldn't blame Mandel, she thought. Not only were the polls looking increasingly bad for them, the past few days haven't felt too great in the inner courtyard either. Since the debate, just as Jenelle had said, The Rules Guardians began an intense campaign, and was now the frontrunner. Whilst The Rules Guardians did not even have any campus presence, their methods of labelling other teams as the enemy of traditional values and 'shunning' them (but really still talking ill about them all the time) has been picked up by similar-minded teams, wanting to ride on this wave of 'conservative awakening', as some commentators are now

calling it. And what better target to pick than the one already chosen by the team they want to emulate? Purple and yellow has been receiving abusive comment after abusive comment for a few weeks now.

And recently it only got worse, in a way similar to the domino effect. Last Wednesday afternoon was when it all went up to another level. It all started when the American president was re-elected, the very president who launched the war last year, who was resolutely opposed to same-sex marriages, and who won his re-election at least partially on the latter point. To add insult to injury for those who supported equality, many states also passed bans on same-sex marriages by popular vote, making their courts and politicians unable to act on the matter, making sure they don't join the equality bandwagon anytime soon. Here in Pacificland, Jashor quickly seized on these two 'victories' and also the victory of the

Australian Prime Minister one month earlier, who was also a strong supporter of the war and a strong opponent of same-sex marriage. "Clearly people want and need strong leaders who will defend their nations and their traditional values, in uncertain times like these. Since our King wouldn't defend our nation properly, we need someone else to do the job," Jashor stated in a television advertisement repeated again and again on television. When King March came out in support of marriage equality, it gave Jashor even more ammunition. "If a people as liberty loving as the Americans won't support it, you know it has nothing to do with liberty," he famously said. At that moment, it appeared King March's reign was over, and his last minute promise to introduce marriage equality was as worthless as bank notes printed by a failing government. Last Saturday's election was only a formality.

Ever since King Jashor's victory, those who believed in a 'strong man' running things have gained tremendous confidence, and defenders of peace, liberty, compassion and equality alike have shrunk in confidence in a very palpable way. This sentiment has clearly spread to the Heirs Council election too, and it looks like the next domino to fall to people like Jashor. Even worse, as often seen amongst high school students around the world, being a 'strong man' was now misinterpreted as being a bully by some candidates and their supporters here in Heirs College. And they didn't even have to be creative about their insults. In America, after the recent bitterly fought election, some who supported the winning side took to the internet to insult the losing side, people who supported peace, people who supported equality, by calling them things like 'weak' and 'loser' again and again, and worse terms. There were plenty of things local bullies could just copy from there.

"Never give up, right? It's part of the Princess Spirit, right?" Angelle said, almost half-heartedly.

"Yes, that's the most important thing," Natalie said.

"Given the situation out there now, should we actually, eh, mild down our platform, a bit, temporarily?" Jenny asked.

Angelle paused for some thought.

"I don't think so. Victories and defeats come and go, but being true to your beliefs and not leaving people behind are very much parts of the Princess Spirit. It would make our whole platform meaningless if we gave it up," she said.

*****

17 November 2004. The inner courtyard was finally quiet now, after many weeks of drama.

After their recent defeat, Team Angelle was now much smaller. In fact, it's only the original four and Mandel here today. It's not surprising that this would happen, but it still hurt. It's sad that many people in this world only stay for victory parties, and will never help to pick up the pieces, Angelle thought.

"Why don't you dry your eyes with this box of weak idiots' tissues and get over it? It's designed just for people like you, after all," Jenelle said as she and her friends walked past Team Angelle, waving an empty tissue box that had been defaced with the word 'WEAK IDIOTS' on it.

"You clearly think we are important enough to you to have wasted time creating that box," Natalie said.

"We need to reboot. It's a long road, and honestly, Mandel was right. I was only running for profile this time anyway. Next time will be our serious test," Angelle said.

"You're only 15 so there are still many chances," Daniel said.

Angelle saw a boy and a girl, about the same height as each other, walking towards them. "Not more insults again," she thought.

As they came closer, Angelle could see that the boy was carrying a notebook computer. "He's a rich boy," she thought. Whilst notebook computers have not been uncommon for

several years now, it's usually owned by adults with serious business to do, and even here at Royal College, it's uncommon for students to have one.

"Hi, my name is Jordan, and this is my sister Katie," the boy said.

"We're twins, by the way," Katie said.

"We just want to say we voted for you guys, and we support you, and believe in what you do," Jordan said.

"What the world needs now is someone like you. A real Princess, who will never give up on her dreams. Don't give up on your beliefs, or your dream of winning those seats on the Council. Keep the good work up and don't ever change. The conservative wave is only temporary," Katie said.

"Don't you think it's here to stay? Many people think so," Jenny said.

"Not everyone, just those sheep who follow the crowd. Read this, by the way," Jordan said, opening up his computer.

"You have access to the internet here?" Daniel asked.

"The school actually provides free Wi-Fi access for those with computers. It's just that most of us don't and can't use it," Mandel said.

"So you don't have to line up like the rest of us to use the computers. Lucky you," Natalie said.

Angelle read the article.

"The so-called conservative awakening is only temporary, like the very conservative 1950s had to come before the 1960s changed everything. Right now, we just need to wait 10 years or so for this demographic change. The forces of change are awakening, whether it's

for equality or for liberty. It's just that the reactionary forces are still a bit stronger right now. But with more young people joining the voting population, things are about to change.....

Angelle wasn't sure if the article made sense, but it cheered her up a bit. At least it offered hope.

"By the way, you guys know that you still have a lot of support, right?" Katie said.

"We do? Let's be serious, right," Angelle said.

"No, I'm serious. Of course it wasn't enough to win you seats this time, but there's still a lot of people who voted for you and will still do so again. Someone even made a song for you," Katie said, as she proceeded to show Angelle.

"When The World Doesn't Know You're Special

You stood in the crowd today

Amongst so many faces, nobody could see you

You felt so small as if you don't exist

Even if you yelled nobody would hear

Days like these are never easy

We don't deserve to be forgotten

When The World Doesn't Know You are Special

Just remember, that I know

And remember, they can't take that away

When The World Doesn't Know You're Even There

Just remember it's their loss

And remember, the doubters aren't worth your time

Cause the World Goes Mad Sometimes

Though that doesn't change who you are

And whatever they tell you

It can't change the fact that you're special to someone"

Chapter 10

The Board Room

It's another new year. It may be just another date on the calendar. But 2005 must represent an opportunity for renewal, Angelle told herself. The bitterness of the last few months of 2004 must now be put behind us, and we must begin a new chapter. "A defeat doesn't mean that one is not meant for greatness. The most important thing to do after a defeat is to get up, regroup, reflect, and try again," Angelle kept telling herself. "Never give up, despite the odds being against you - it's what a princess would do. If I am to run on a platform of the Princess Spirit, then I have to live it too." After all, every successful person who has ever lived must have also had their fair share of defeats, the difference was that they got up and try again. And what better time to reboot than during the start of a brand new year?

In every battle, one must clearly assess the battlefield, before deciding to make any move. So what is the battlefield like out there right now, at the start of 2005? The 'conservative awakening' may have swept through Pacificland, some overseas countries, and even the Heirs Council, but does that tell the whole story? Angelle decided that she must read about the situation out there. Whilst she had read a lot of news and mainstream opinion in the past two years in preparation for the election, there's a lot more out there to be discovered, she thought. What Jordan and Katie showed her in the past few weeks opened up a whole new world for her, and she was eager to find out more about what people really thought, outside the mainstream news reports. And maybe somewhere in there lies the answer as to what she had to do next.

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It's been two weeks of reading everything she could get her hands on, Angelle began to notice a bigger reality, something she had never noticed or even thought about before. Forget those who said that The Rules Guardians will control Heirs Council for a generation to come, and forget those who said that Jashor will remain King for a decade or more. Who knows? After all, last week Angelle came across an article from 1997 saying that King March would be on the throne for a whole generation, and he only lasted for eight years in reality. People keep predicting the future on what we know right now, and keep predicting future trends on recent developments, but it's often not accurate. Whatever we have to live through right now may look very real and permanent, but in hindsight it may look very temporary, something that people made a big fuss of that was never worth the fuss. Perhaps that article,

the first one Jordan showed her, was right. Perhaps even next decade will be worlds apart from where we are now. Sometimes reading things from the past gives you perspective, just like this. We should thank the internet for letting us access things in the past so easily, even though it only stretches back ten years or so, Angelle thought. One day it will be even greater, when we can access things decades in the past. Maybe one day in the future people will read about the conservative awakening of 2004, and laugh about how it had vanished even before the decade ended.

And there's another thing. Through her reading, she also found a potential way back to victory, for herself, for her team, and for all those who believed in liberty, compassion, fairness and everything that The Rules Guardians and their kind didn't stand for. She decide to summon a meeting of Team Angelle, in the spare room of her home. It would be a regular thing from now

on. They would work on their goal until success came.

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"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to the Board Room. We will be meeting here regularly, after we get to decide on a timetable together. This is our Headquarters, the Headquarters of Team Princess Spirit.

You may be wondering why I have called this particular meeting so urgently. I am pleased to say that I have found a path to victory after all. It will include some reflection, some connecting with people, and some hard work, but it's something very possible. Unlike what some people are saying, I don't believe that The Rules Guardians will control the Council for a generation, or even half a generation. Who

knows, really? But we can set out to prove them wrong.

"Whilst the conservative awakening did claim a lot of victories last year, there is still a lot of strong discontent out there, discontent that can be the undoing of the conservative awakening soon enough. After all, victory is a winner-takes-all game, and the winners just need to do slightly better than the losers to 'take it all'. What an unfair system. But it also means that undoing any victory is easier than it looks, especially when one has momentum.

"Although, how can we have momentum, when everyone is looking so defeatist? When even those who were only decrying The Rules Guardians for its treatment of us at the debate several weeks ago are now saying that we all need to make peace with the same Values Team, because apparently now they are here to

stay and those uncompromisingly opposed to them would be crushed. What a cowardly thing to say! A real Princess, or Prince, will never bow down to bullies. Never!

"If we are to be a winners, we can't be dragged down by all these losers. In other words, we have to stop listening to those cowards and start creating our own momentum. Here's my plan: we should connect with as many as possible of those groups of people disaffected by The Rules Guardians controlling council in particular, and also the so-called conservative awakening more generally. They include people as diverse as interfaith groups, gay rights champions, anti-war organisations, and even conservatives who just don't like this brand of conservatism, and many other types of people too. I want us all to do our research, and write down every such group we can find. Then we will decide when and how to connect with each group."

There was applause. That made Angelle confident again. At least optimism had returned to Team Angelle, even if there is pessimism everywhere else.

Chapter 11

The Interfaith Club Dilemma

Angelle was hating The Rules Guardians more and more every day. Her dislike of these people no longer had anything to do with the tactics they used on debate day or their rumoured connection with King Jashor's family which gave them great advantage in funding, it was all about what they believed now. A 'clash of ideals', as some would call it. According to her detailed research, The Rules Guardians was made up of people from various backgrounds, who had a common belief that morals were in decline because of 'weak leadership' from Kings and authority figures, that various 'social ills', including, in their view, the very existence of women who 'dare' to disobey their husbands and the very existence of same-sex relationships, were all caused by weak Kings and societies 'tolerating' these 'deviations'. Of course, there was the unspoken belief that

liberty should be restricted so that their vision of society can be imposed on all. Essentially a bunch of fascists, she thought. People should be able to cherish and live their own beliefs, and we should respect each other for our beliefs, Angelle thought, and people who want the King to impose particular worldviews on society were the worst kind. Not only that, but stupid, since one day the King of the day can turn on them too. She also found out that the wider conservative awakening here in Pacificland was actually comprised of a variety of people and groups, and although some were like The Rules Guardians, others simply had the misguided belief that what they were doing would solve the crisis of declining family values, as if gay people were to blame for the divorce rate when they couldn't even get married, and fighting wars overseas would help in any way, even though it destroyed families.

Sometimes, you need to create your own positivity to counteract all the hopelessness out there. Angelle likes to put her emotions into songs, and recently she had been writing quite a few songs, just to get her positivity running again. Today, she's written yet another one, one she particularly liked.

"Anthem of Idealists

I dream of a world

Where no one has to lose

I dream of a world

Where we can live together

And I will try my best to

Help this dream come true before my eyes

I dream of a world

Where there's no more poverty

I dream of a world

Where war is history

And I will try my best to

Help this dream come true before my eyes

I do believe that dreams do come true

That they can be achieved if we just work towards them

I do believe that dreams do come true

That they can be achieved if we just work towards them

If you will just join us and work toward our dreams

One day the world will be a much better place

If you will just join us and work toward our dreams

One day the world will be a much better place"

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Angelle read the list of 156 groups of people that were supposedly in some way unhappy with The Rules Guardians and/or the conservative awakening movement, compiled from the research of Team Angelle collectively. One group stood out to her: the interfaith peace activists. Unlike any of the other 155 options, they provided the perfect key to smashing any resemblance of peace within The Values Group. Whilst the people in The Values Group had very similar goals for society, they came from various religious backgrounds, and due to their deep middle-ages style beliefs,

mostly did not tolerate each others' religious faiths. As long as this issue is not raised they remain a team, but if Team Angelle was able to form an alliance with the interfaith groups and make this an election issue, The Rules Guardians may explode even before they make it to election day. Intolerant people defeated by their own intolerance, how just would that be. This is an opportunity too good to miss.

But there was one compromise the group, in particular some members, had to be willing to make.

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"Starting with the interfaith club at the College? Sounds like a good idea," Mandel said.

"Definitely worth a try," Natalie said.

"Um... there's a catch, unfortunately," Angelle said.

"What catch?" Jordan asked.

"Unfortunately, sometimes when we want success in the end, we need to play it skilfully in the middle," Angelle said.

"What do you mean, actually?" Katie asked.

"Let me put it this way: the people we are meeting are nice people, they are not like The Rules Guardians, but they are still religious people, and some may not like us as much if we talked about marriage equality, so we may need to keep that part of the platform away for the time being. I promise you we will stay true to that part of our platform, and we will fight for it in appropriate times. This is all just tactics," Angelle said.

There was a pause from everyone, as if to absorb the information they had just been given.

"Are you okay with it, everyone?" Angelle asked, particularly looking at Natalie.

There was another pause, as Natalie appeared to think and the others waited for her to speak.

"I'm fine with it. We all need to play it smart anyway, if we want to win anything in life. I can also speak for my sister, I know that she's also for playing it smart," she finally said.

The rest of the group nodded cautiously in agreement.

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Angelle and Natalie had sat through a whole session of the interfaith club meeting just for an opportunity to introduce The Princess Spirit Team. "Two minutes only, at the end of the meeting," the club president had said when they asked him for the opportunity. Two

minutes was tough but doable. Afterwards they would leave a box for 'expressions of interest'. If they could get some people from here to join The Princess Spirit Team, it would be a great start, they thought. But as the meeting rolled on, it appeared to Angelle that this club may not have been what they were looking for after all. It was definitely an interfaith club, with Hindus, Christians, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Pagans and Sikhs all represented. But it looked more like a friendship club where they discussed life at college, and where to hang out after school, rather than a club for the discussion of interfaith issues. Angelle decided that they should make the brief presentation they prepared anyway, at least it would be good practice, and if even one or two of them joined up it would still be a start towards rebuilding Team Angelle from the rump it had become since the defeat.

"Now, we have a special presentation from two girls who asked me for the opportunity to speak to you. Since we have a policy of welcoming any potential new members, I decided to grant their request. It's your time now, Angela and Natasha," President Jack said.

"It's Angelle and Natalie," Natalie said.

"Well, you may know me as a candidate who ran for election for the Heirs Council last year," Angelle began.

The group collectively shook their heads. It was discouraging, but Angelle forced a smile and continued.

"Anyway, we are Team Princess Spirit and we believe our platform aligns with the goal of promoting interfaith peace in the world, so we decided to, well, tell you about us," Angelle continued.

Some people appeared to look puzzled. Another bad sign.

"We support liberty of conscience, mutual respect, world peace, and tolerance and inclusion for all, something that we believe to align with both the general goal of interfaith peace and friendship, and also the core values of all the great religions of the world," Natalie said.

"So if you want to get to know us more, or perhaps sign up to be part of our team, you can put a note in this box to tell us who you are, what you think we can do for your cause, and how we can contact you. Thank you," Angelle said.

Chapter 12

What Makes Us Who We Are

"I didn't really understand what that had to do with interfaith club," read one message.

"It's cool. So deep, so deep," said the next one.

"Thanks but no thanks to your advertising," went the next one.

"What was that all about?" read the next one. As well as the one after that.

Despite being well received at the interfaith club, or at least Angelle believed so, none of them wanted to find out more about Team Princess Spirit. But that's not the worst part.

What's worse was that they just did not understand the point of Team Princess Spirit. None of them did, apparently. Angelle painfully tallied up the 'reasons for rejection' so that she could make a presentation to her team later.

"A princess never gives up," she was caught saying to herself.

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"There's probably no other way to put it. I'm sorry, people," Angelle said at the end of the presentation. There was no point in denying the disaster, she thought.

"I'm sorry for having suggested the idea," Mandel said.

"Don't be sorry, all of you. Those people were lazy idiots who wouldn't think for themselves. We can do without them," Katie said.

"I wouldn't use those words," Angelle said, but she actually felt like agreeing with Katie. There's only so much anyone can take and still be kind, after all.

"Let's step back and take another look at the whole thing. It really ain't as bad as it looks," Natalie said.

"No words will change what it was," Angelle said. "I take full responsibility. We didn't explain it well."

"Learning from our lessons. That's what I meant. Interfaith club is but a small segment of our potential audience, and the most important thing is we learn our lessons and bounce back," Natalie said.

"So what is the lesson anyway? Just not to go to interfaith club again?" Jordan asked.

"Of course that's part of the lesson. Those people weren't going to be the most receptive in any sense, so we shouldn't waste any more time with them. But that's not all. As Angelle said, we need to improve our messaging next time," Natalie said.

"What do you mean by messaging? Like IM, which is short for instant messaging, on the internet?" Daniel asked.

"You really spend too much time using AIM. Trust me, nobody will use it in less than ten years. But the concept of messaging shall be forever important. It's about how you deliver your message to your audience. You see, I have become quite obsessed with observing international politics recently, and I have been studying last year's US election seriously," Natalie said.

"I don't think we are in a mood to revisit Bush's victory here," Katie said. "May I tell all of you that I don't like or support Bush."

"Me neither," Daniel said.

"Focus, people. Let's not talk about Bush," Natalie said.

"But weren't you the one who started this?" Jordan said.

"No, I wanted to talk about election messaging. There's been extensive analysis about what went right for Bush and what went wrong for Kerry, and there's something we can learn here. Basically, there is growing consensus that it all boiled down to the image and the message," Natalie said.

"But Kerry's a good guy and he had good policies, right," Jordan asked.

"That's right. But that wasn't enough. Image isn't just about being nice. And a bunch of policies just cannot be digested by the busy working people out there effectively, for them to understand us properly," Natalie explained.

"You mean the stupid rednecks out there, right? So what do you suggest, lowering ourselves to their level and talking in empty slogans?" Katie said.

"Well, if we are to reach out to people we ought not to think of them as stupid rednecks or things like that. And my characterisation of these people as busy, hardworking people who just do not have the time to look at policies in detail would likely be more accurate in any case. As for empty slogans, that's not our way. But putting our values into simple, memorable yet meaningful phrases, I'm all for that," Natalie said.

"But isn't that just a euphemism for slogans?" Katie asked.

"I think Natalie has a point. Our stuff wasn't digested well by the interfaith club, and we don't want that to happen again," Angelle said.

"And I just want to say again, we don't want empty slogans. We want meaningful ideas, that match up to our opponents, The Rules Guardians and their allies," Natalie said.

"Just what meaningful things do they offer?" Katie asked.

"It may not mean much to us, but it does mean something to some people," Natalie said.

"Like family values that are not inclusive of all families?" Katie offered.

"Unfortunately, it appeals to some people. I don't know, maybe those who are afraid of change, of embracing what I would call 'real family values'. But what we need to do is just to offer something even better. What can Team Princess Spirit and its values do for you and

your family? This should be the question we base our messages upon," Natalie said.

"By the way, I don't mean to interrupt, but I just received a text saying that Canada has just passed marriage equality. Three countries down, more than a hundred to go. We could have made four, if Jashor didn't get in," Daniel said.

"The world is changing, bit by bit. Which is good news. But to get us there quicker, we need to focus on working with the situation we've got. And I believe Natalie has some good ideas here," Angelle said.

Natalie had opened up a new presentation file on the computer, as Daniel and Angelle were talking.

"We should do some brainstorming here. So what do you think Team Princess Spirit can

offer for you and your family, if you were someone else out there?" Natalie asked.

"It's the way to a peaceful world," Mandel said.

Natalie typed 'world peace - now' into the computer.

"It will create happy families everywhere," Angelle said.

Natalie shortened this to 'happy families everywhere'.

"It can help people's dreams come true," Jordan offered.

This was shortened to 'making dreams come true'.

"Can this be perhaps linked to our major theme of freedom?" Angelle asked.

Natalie typed another phrase, 'the freedom to chase your dreams'.

"And not just dreaming of anything, but dreaming about a better world for all?" Katie offered.

This generated yet another phrase, 'the freedom to dream of a better world for all'.

"How about helping everyone be true to themselves," Daniel asked.

Natalie thought for a moment.

'A world without fakeness' was what she came up with in the end. Daniel looked satisfied.

And so more brainstorming went on.

Chapter 13
The Road to Midterms

Angelle still doesn't know how she should feel about the surprise announcement of this year's first ever midterm elections for Heirs Council, where just like in the US Congress, half of the Council's members would face re-election. On one hand, it's an opportunity. Any opportunity is a great opportunity. Plus, 2005 just passed by without major achievement, mainly because there was no clear goal to work towards, with the next elections thought to be not until late 2008. Sure, they had come out with plenty of short, meaningful messages since that meeting in June last year, but without an opportunity to test them, who knows if they were really useful for anything? A campaign would provide an opportunity to test everything, even if they don't end up winning anything. In fact, after the recent lack of success, Angelle was almost certain 2006 wouldn't be her year. But this

opportunity, just to test some new ideas, to get ready for 2008, would mean the world to Angelle.

On the other hand, this announcement was one not taken well by her friends. Everyone's thoughts was that King Jashor forced this extra election so he could clean out some of the seats currently held by the opposition, so that The Rules Guardians and their allies could control the Council. And if that happens, which opinion polls published today in the school newspaper say it could, who knows what the new Council could do? Plus just the fear of that happening and the hopelessness of being 'oppressed by Jashor', as some people are putting it, has certainly got a substantial part of Team Princess Spirit in a low mood. If that mood continued, Angelle really wouldn't be able to campaign effectively anyway.

"Looks like it's going to be a busy three months for all of us," Jenelle said as she walked by. Angelle had learned to ignore her by now.

"Or is it going to be for you? You know, you can always choose not to run, since we are winning every seat anyway, as today's polls say. Not running means not being a loser again, you know. I'm just trying to think for you," Jenelle said.

"Don't you have a campaign to run?" Katie asked.

"Of course, but I can spare a minute to talk to you losers as charity, since we're winning anyway," Jenelle said. "But I got to go now."

"I really hate her attitude," Katie said.

"She's been like this from day 1, so I've just learned to shut her out. It took three years, but I finally got there," Angelle said.

"And The Rules Guardians is really running a candidate like that?" Jordan asked.

"She's been with them for two years, so it's a loyalty reward kind of thing. Basically, she's popular and she's useful to them," Natalie explained. "It just shows how The Rules Guardians aren't really about values whatsoever."

"Why?" Mandel asked.

"You see, she wasn't part of The Rules Guardians until late in 2004, when they looked like winning the last election," Angelle explained.

"And from what I have heard, she actually made jokes about their 'values' earlier that year," Katie said. "What a hypocrite, joining a team you don't really believe in."

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Angelle thought she could shut out Jenelle, but this morning's exchange just strengthened her resolve to run again. Angelle decided she needed to do something special for this campaign season, as it's the only way out of such an impossible situation. And she needed to introduce the special idea soon, or else the team will never even be in a mood to start campaigning. She needed the team to start believing, today.

"I need some advice from my adviser, and the rest of the team cannot hear that I am asking," Angelle said as she and Natalie were walking to class together.

"You're always welcome," Natalie said.

"I need one big, special idea. Something that, even if it will not realistically win us any seats, will make the team believe that we have a

chance. And I will need to launch it soon, before they become any more depressed," Angelle said.

"Good thinking. I knew you weren't one to give up," Natalie said. "And I agree with your strategy."

"I think it would have to be something that looks new, big and promising, and hasn't been tried before," Angelle said.

"I think you are on the correct path again. How about using social media to promote your campaign? You can launch it at any time, even today," Natalie said.

"What are you talking about?" Angelle asked.

"You know, MySpace, things like that," Natalie said.

"I don't use MySpace. Besides, how can that help me?" Angelle asked. Angelle's impression was that MySpace was for people with nothing better to do than to spend hours to decorate

their profiles with 'glitter' that only existed in pixels.

"I'll show you this afternoon," Natalie said.

Angelle remained sceptical, but at this point she would try anything.

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"Ladies and Gentlemen, today I am announcing the launch of my campaign, the campaign of Team Princess Spirit, for the 2006 elections!" Angelle said in front of the 67 people who had bothered to turn up, as she unveiled what turned out, surprisingly, to be a computer.

"I don't mean to interrupt, but shouldn't we not fight an unwinnable election," Mandel said.

"Unwinnable? Whose to judge that? We won't know until later in the year, either way. But a Princess never gives up, not when she's got other people's lives riding on her success. And there are many lives that will change for the better if we prevail," Angelle said, trying to look confident.

"But what's the computer doing here?" Jordan asked.

"Well, it's our secret weapon," Angelle said as she connected it to the projector, which lighted up showing the MySpace homepage.

There were murmurs in the audience.

"MySpace as the secret weapon?" one was overheard saying, in disbelief.

"The world is changing. And so are election campaigns. Promotion via social media will

soon become a vital part of any campaign, and some people have predicted that by 2008 every candidate will be using it. But if we can get in early, and use it in 2006, it will give us an edge," Angelle said, as she did a few clicks and the screen now displayed the MySpace profile of someone running for political office in the US.

There was careful applause.

"Overseas, some candidates are already using MySpace and other similar platforms to get their word out," Angelle explained. "But this is, in our opinion, not a very well set-up profile from a campaign point of view. Yes, he has a MySpace profile, but all it has are his name and photo, a brief bio and some contact details. He doesn't have our other secret weapon, something we spent so much time developing in the past year."

Angelle did a few more clicks, and the Team Princess Spirit profile came up. It wasn't on MySpace, but rather it was on the Royal College Network, the new social network the school's new technology orientated chancellor had set up for every student. Predictably, it had a purple and yellow background, and a photo of Angelle on it. But it also had lots of short messages on it. 'World Peace - Now', 'Happy families everywhere', 'Making dreams come true', 'The freedom to dream of a better world for all', and 'A world without fakeness' were just some of them. Angelle clicked on 'Happy families everywhere', and it linked back to the Team Princess Spirit blog with a list of blog posts about marriage equality, the importance of looking after disadvantaged communities, and the like.

"Social media provides a platform to send messages out to the world. But the messages have to be easy to receive, and really mean something to the people receiving them. And in the past year, my team has been working on messages that are easy to digest and speak to dreaming minds and loving hearts around the world. This is our secret weapon. The Rules Guardians can offer only empty slogans based on fear of change, but our messages are all about love and a better world, the very things the Princess Spirit is about," Angelle said.

This time, there was real, loud applause. It appeared that Angelle had made a convincing case. She felt a bit relieved.

"We deliberately chose to set up our profile on Royal College Network, because from this year every student has to use it to check their mail. So all of you should be familiar with it. If you

are a true Team Princess Spirit supporter, you should send us a friend request, and we will approve it right away. You can also help by sharing our profile with your friends, for example by featuring it on your own profile. Every bit will help," Angelle said.

Chapter 14
Change The Era

The Team Princess Profile has been live for two weeks, as of today, and has been receiving a steady stream of audience. It has also already made 129 friends, not many, but a good start, considering that campaign season hadn't even begun yet. And it appears that The Rules Guardians still haven't set up a functioning profile in response. Rumours are that they just couldn't get one running, mainly because the page is maintained by the parents of the candidates, many of whom are very new to social media. It would also appear to confirm long standing whispers that The Rules Guardians is full of lazy and talentless people who are propped up by their parents, who are doing it for both ideological reasons and to help their undeserving children get great starts to their careers. Just these thoughts alone have given Team Princess Spirit a popularity boost in

recent days. After all, everyone loves to support an underdog facing an unfair playing field, but still managing to outshine its opponent every now and then.

But Team Princess Spirit does have one social media competitor. It's a new party called Change The Era, who are also running for election this year. Their profile went live three days after Angelle's, and it had the same format to it, so Angelle was certain they were watching her moves. Yesterday, they sent her a message, asking to meet in person, for a possible alliance, whatever that could mean. Angelle decided to take just Natalie along, not knowing whether they were really wanting to be friendly or not.

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Angelle and Natalie had never been in this part of the College before. After all, this was the dormitory area, and as all the core Team Angelle members lived locally, they just never had to come here for anything. But today, Change The Era wanted to meet in Room 552, somebody's dormitory room.

Natalie knocked softly on the door, marked 552.

A young man, tall and thin, with shoulder length brown hair, came to answer it.

"Hi, I am Nick," he said as they got inside. "This is Change The Era HQ, AKA dorm room 552, AKA where I sleep."

"Is this meeting just with you, or is there anyone else?" Angelle asked, slightly

uncomfortable, almost reaching into her bag to make sure her personal alarm was still there.

"It will be just me representing CTE today, but that should be good enough, because I am the President," Nick said.

"So what are we here for, actually," Natalie asked.

"To discuss a possible alliance at the election, of course," Nick said.

"And why would we want that?" Angelle asked.

"CTE and your team are both up and coming parties, facing an unjust system, with a common enemy, The Rules Guardians," Nick said.

"But so are most of the other parties and candidates running for election this time around," Angelle said.

"What I think we need to find out is, what does CTE stand for, what is it about," Natalie said.

"Good question," Nick said. "We are for radical change. We are against the culture and system that has favoured parties like The Rules Guardians, and Kings like Jashor. We don't just ask for a seat at the table, you see. We want to Change The Era, change this College, this country, and even the world, into a new era. We want to change the conversation, so that a new world can be born."

"That's not very specific. What do you specifically propose to do?" Natalie asked.

"You see the 'values' that The Rules Guardians talk about again and again? Nobody out there is even questioning if they are good or bad. We will question every single one of them, and I personally stand against almost all of that rubbish," Nick said.

"You mean, as in opposing gay marriages, for example?" Natalie asked. "Surely a lot of people are questioning that approach, even if it's still a minority here in 2006."

"I see you didn't get my point. I don't care about marriages as I don't care about family values. Now that's something you don't hear much out there, right? People don't question if the family is good, for example," Nick said.

"Well, some families are unfortunately dysfunctional, but most families are there to support people when they need it, and for most people it would be ungrateful to spit on their family, so to say, right?" Angelle said.

She then realised she may have gone a bit too far.

"I'm sorry if your own experience of family wasn't good, but what I was just trying to say was that it isn't the case for most of us," she said. "Just trying to answer your question there."

"You still don't get my point. There's nothing wrong with my family. It's just that we don't believe the family should be the fundamental unit of society," Nick said.

"Well, unfortunately, this is not what we believe at Team Princess Spirit," Natalie said.

"Let's not talk about that anymore. Is there anything else CTE stands for?" Angelle asked.

"As I said, basically we question everything. We also question freedom, what it is, if it's good," Nick said.

"Well, I think you and I can agree that both King Jashor and The Rules Guardians don't offer too much freedom," Natalie said. "Liberty is a core principle of Team Princess Spirit. Freedom enables the Princess Spirit to flourish. It allows people to truly embrace who they are, chase their dreams, and help build their vision of the world. Without freedom, in a society where

everything is decided by someone else above you, none of that can happen."

"You really believe in all of that?" Nick said, almost sarcastically.

Angelle had a bad feeling about this.

"What else should we believe in instead?" she said, almost defensively.

"You know why there's still so much sexism out there?" Nick said.

"Well, the world used to be much more sexist, and it doesn't change overnight. Team Princess Spirit will also attempt to change this. It wouldn't be easy, it will take some time, but I'm confident we can get there," Natalie said.

"How will you get there? By giving people more 'freedom'? If so, you are actually part of the problem. You see, as long as people have too much freedom to choose, bigots also have too much freedom to choose, to skirt around any anti-discrimination laws we have," Nick said.

"But in a society without freedom, we would both be in the kitchen all day rather than here as students," Angelle said. "That's the beauty of freedom."

"But freedom can only get you so far. We need to take control of the levers of power in society to end the injustice once and for all," Nick said.

"I admire your commitment to justice, but I think that's dangerous. Imagine if you were King, and you reformed society the way you wanted. And then another King came along, and used the same powers to reverse everything back to the 1950s," Natalie said.

"Whereas in a free society, progress may take some time, but it's not easily reversed. There's no way a free society would take away our equal education rights anymore, for example, at least here in Pacificland," Angelle said.

"It looks like we can't agree on that either. Not today at least. So is there anything else you want to talk about?" Natalie asked.

"Well, let's get to the practical bit. Our proposed alliance," Nick said.

"Why would we still have an alliance, when we can't agree on basic issues? I don't think we will have an alliance, sorry to say," Natalie said.

"But practically it's good, and it's necessary, for the both of us," Nick said.

"We have principles, and we stand for them," Natalie said.

"I don't think I can personally agree to an alliance at this point either, but we are a team, and I will tell my team what happened here today, the reasons you are proposing an alliance, and let them vote on it," Angelle said.

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In the end, the vote wasn't even close. It came out at 119-2. Angelle breathed a sigh of relief.

"Now that it's all done, can I ask you something?" Natalie said.

"Go ahead," Angelle said.

"I wonder why you let them vote at all. It would really hurt us electorally in the longer term, and I know it would also hurt your values personally, to have this alliance. I wouldn't have let them vote," Natalie said.

"Well, the results speak for themselves, right?" Angelle said.

"But people aren't always rational. It could have gone the other way," Natalie said.

"I believed in my team. And it appears that I was right to do so. But the other reason was that I can't decide everything myself. If I made a

decision and it was disadvantageous in the short term, the team would lose confidence in me and it will fall apart. But if I let everyone have a say, then we are in this together, no matter how it turns out," Angelle said.

Chapter 15

Coming of Age

Things are always easier the second time round. At least, they look more familiar, and hence look easier. Now that campaigning season in the Inner Courtyard is now a familiar sight to Angelle and her team, it doesn't seem as daunting as the first time. The fact that this campaign season would be extra short, just several weeks, also make it look easier, although Angelle and her team knew that King Jashor deliberately decided to do this because it would favour The Rules Guardians and their allies.

Team Purple and Yellow also looked quite a bit larger, stronger and more well organised than last time. They had their messages, simple sentences of several words each that spoke directly to the heart, displayed prominently on

their banners, which attracted plenty of interest. And although they were still much smaller than The Rules Guardians, this time Team Princess Spirit was in fact one of the largest teams here. This was partly because Angelle was now more well known and had more followers, as a fourth year student, and partly because they started recruiting early, via social media. Of course, going forward this advantage would be reduced, now that The Rules Guardians as well as almost every other party now had a social media presence.

There was also another reason why Team Princess Spirit is relatively larger this time, a reason Angelle really doesn't like.

"It looks like we may enter the top 4 in terms of size by the end of the week," Mandel said, observing the different banners in the Courtyard.

Angelle was watching too, and she was counting how many teams were left. There were only 13, including the very small teams probably on the verge of dropping out, and two teams that were just puppets of The Rules Guardians.

"Yes, unfortunately," Angelle said.

"Why unfortunately? Shouldn't you be happy?" Katie asked.

"I'm just angry that people aren't running just because they think Jashor will get his way anyway," Angelle replied.

"But you should be happy, because that means you really do have a chance this time. In a few weeks time, The Rules Guardians and their two allies, this team, and Change The Era will be the only major players left. Anyone who hates The Rules Guardians but are uncomfortable with the radicalism of Change The Era will vote for us," Jordan said.

"Yes, I know I should be happy. It's just that I also feel angry, angry at people who give up all too easily," Angelle said.

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This birthday is unlike any other. Not only was it special because Angelle was turning 18, which meant lots of speeches, but today there were more than 200 people here, which meant that there were a lot of people to speak to. Angelle had invited all of Team Princess Spirit along with everyone in her big family, after all, so she should have expected this. But it still seems surreal to her. She remembered that ten years ago she was scared that her 18th would the smallest anyone had ever seen, because she was the unpopular kid back then. Eight-year-old her would have been overjoyed if she knew what was to happen.

"It's time, my dear," her mom said.

It was time to give her 18th speech. In front of 250 plus people, no less. Not that she is scared about speaking in front of crowds anymore. But this would be such a special occasion for her personally, that she felt a bit nervous.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, and Princess Spirit people,

May I start by saying how grateful I am that all of you are attending my party. When I was little I always thought that my 18th would be a very private occasion, because I was simply unpopular back then. So you know how happy I am that all of you are here.

I am only here, doing what I am doing today, thanks to people like you. Like my mom, who taught me the importance of aiming high, of staying true to your dreams. Or like my dad, who taught me the value of hard work, of not giving up. Or like Team Princess Spirit, who believed in me, and stuck with me even when times were not so great. I cannot pretend to know what will happen at the ballot box next month, but whatever happens to me there, I know everything will have been worth it, because you believed in me.

In the years ahead, I want to do you all proud. You deserve something back from me after all, having invested so much in me. I can't guarantee that I will bring success every time, but I will try my best. I will never give up, because a Princess never gives up. And I will never change the person I am, the things I stand for, no matter which way the wind out there blows.

Thank you."

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Angelle and Natalie were reading the latest opinion polls on the school newspaper, the last polls before the elections tomorrow. It had both good and bad news. The good news was that Team Princess Spirit was likely to win one seat. A few months ago that would have been beyond Angelle's wildest dreams. It appeared that, as Jordan had predicted several weeks ago, when the smaller teams packed up and left, more and more votes came to Team Princess Spirit. Being one of the last teams not to give up came with its rewards. But the bad news was that it was only going to be one seat, meaning that whilst Angelle would likely make it to the Council, none of her friends would. The

accompanying editorial also pointed out that had Team Princess Spirit and Change The Era formed an alliance, there would have been more votes for both parties, likely winning an extra seat for both.

"If you made it to the Council and we didn't, we would still be happy for you no matter what, remember," Natalie said.

"Really?" Angelle said, not knowing what else to say.

"Of course. We've always been behind you. We've always believed in you. And in just two years' time, we'll get another chance, and it will be because of you," Natalie said.

"I have to confess, I actually think we made it this far because of you," Angelle said. "You've got all the great ideas."

"But they would mean nothing without a leader like you. I could never have been as brave and

bold as you. Nominating in first year? Speaking in front of hundreds of people? That's not me. That's not just anyone. But that's you. You're special, you know," Natalie said.

"Looks like now only one of you will make it. Isn't it a shame that you rejected the alliance?" Nick said.

Angelle and Natalie looked up and found Nick standing right in front of them.

"What are you doing here? Isn't your zone over there?" Angelle said.

"I'm just coming to say hi. And also to remind you that your rejection of our deal meant that we would both have one less seat, and they will be going to The Rules Guardians instead. You need to be smarter next time," Nick said.

"The alliance will never happen, sorry," Natalie said.

"From my memory, you were first to advise your leader to reject us. It looks like you, number two on the ticket, will be the one with the most to lose. I know you regret it," Nick said.

"I actually have no regrets whatsoever. Doing the right thing by what we believe in is the most important. Forming alliances on incompatible platforms is not something I will endorse," Natalie said.

Chapter 16

The Heirs Council

One of the perks of being a Member of Heirs Council is that you are driven to your meetings in a state car, which usually happen after school, once a month or so. Today was the first time Angelle was one of those being picked up to go to the meeting. She was now part of the elite at Royal College, one of only fifty of so MHCs in the whole school, who got to have this special treatment. This was her moment. There were only two things she wished could be different. She really did not enjoy the fact that her friends couldn't be here with her. But they would soon be coming too - just two more years, she thought. Another thing she didn't like was that Jenelle got to the pickup point earlier than she did and was able to make fun of her as the 'late MHC'. But that really didn't matter too much. Now that she was an MHC, she shouldn't have time thinking about silly things like that.

The meeting was on the outskirts of the city, so Angelle had a long ride. After what seemed like forever, Angelle suddenly noticed that the car was now underground. She had missed how it got there, but it appeared that she was in a tunnel. Then it suddenly came to a stop, in front of a giant door made of two huge metal panels.

"Agent ID and fingerprint please," announced a robotic voice.

Angelle's driver waved his ID in front of a card reader, and then proceeded to imprint his thumb on the attached fingerprint reader.

"Permission granted," the robotic voice announced.

The metal doors slid open, and revealed what appeared to be a giant lift. The car drove into the lift, and Angelle could feel it being lifted up gradually. And then it stopped. Before she knew it, the car door was being opened up.

"Welcome, Angelle of the House of Easterner, of Pacificland," a woman's voice said.

Angelle turned her head and found that a tall blond woman had opened the car door and was gesturing for her to follow. Angelle actually felt a bit nervous, this being her first time in such an unfamiliar environment, alone. It certainly didn't help that her family was half a world away now, either.

Angelle now noticed that they were now walking on a long red carpet, and that the blond woman was carrying the family flag of the House of Easterner, red and blue with a golden heart in the middle. She must have been assigned to assist me, Angelle thought.

"Where are we going?" Angelle decided to ask.

"To the Great Hall, of course. Where the meeting is going to start shortly. Hurry up or we'll be late," she said.

After almost an eternity of walking, Angelle now found herself in a room full of seats, facing a single podium. The blond woman guided her towards one of the seats in the front row, apparently already assigned to her.

"Do I have to sit here?" Angelle asked.

"It's been assigned. You are a new member, and therefore you have been assigned in the front row," the blond woman said, before turning away and leaving. She left the Easterner family flag attached to a slot at the back of Angelle's seat.

All around her, people were settling into seats. Some were already chatting away with their neighbours, and it appeared that some people actually knew each other quite well. Angelle suddenly felt quite alone, as she knew nobody here.

A young man walked across the podium, to where there was a microphone stand. The house fell quiet.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," he began.

"I am Prince Andrew of the House of Mantan. And now, may I introduce, Prince Jason of the House of Wetlands, the Head of the Heirs Council," Andrew said. Jason appeared from a door behind the podium, and Andrew left via that door. The house erupted into applause. Jason is well-liked in the Heirs Council because he has a friendly personality, and because he is seen as smart. But mostly because he has been able to prevent division. But everyone knows that the peace may be about to end, with Jason being 45 and really too old to continue in the Council.

Angelle missed most of Jason's speech because, honestly, most of it was meaningless to her anyway. Many others probably tuned out of Jason's speech too, because it consisted of meaningless praising of almost every empire in the world. Jason really is a smart man, and he

knows that some fault lines are better left untouched. This is his key to maintaining the peace. Yet uncontroversial means boring most of the time. And in times like these, when the fault lines are getting angrier and angrier, and when Jason is seen by most as yesterday's man, to be gone in less than two years' time, what Jason had to say was ultimately seen as irrelevant. As Jason continued to speak, people were chatting amongst themselves, perhaps about the coming Great Cultural War that everyone is expecting now. Not that anyone had to pay attention anymore. Heirs Council used to invite speeches from around the world, and votes on various resolutions. But in the name of unity and peace, in recent years Jason has made sure that there are no votes to be taken. And without votes nobody bothers to give speeches.

"And may I announce, this will be an important year too. After 21 years as the Head of Council,

I will be retiring at the next election. Yes, you will have a new Head of Council," Jason said.

The house fell silent. There were some audible gasps. For while this was all just expected, the early announcement meant that the Great Cultural War had begun. Those who stood for tradition versus those who stood for innovation. Those who stood for age-old boundaries versus those who stood for a new level of inclusion. The fault-lines had been getting bigger and bigger since the 1980s or so, and the world was already at breaking point. Both sides knew that securing the next generation would mean conclusively winning, once and for all. With the leadership of the Heirs Council up for grabs, the stakes couldn't be higher.

Angelle, being new to this 'game', has yet to fully understand these implications. However,

her parents have taught her enough to let her understand the chances important elections can gift to otherwise new arrivals. This year, she is going to work very hard to build her team, and get them elected into this place. That way, she will no longer be alone in here, and she will have a solid start towards wherever she is destined to go.

Chapter 17

A Change of Mood

The year 2008 had barely begun, and now there's a mood of change everywhere. This was due to both local and global factors. Locally, the stakes inherent in this year's Heirs Council elections has energised all sides. Whilst King Jashor and his The Rules Guardians allies have doubled down on their efforts in the hope that they will finally control the Council as well as its new leadership after these elections, they seem to be going backwards rather than forwards, mainly because the opposition forces have begun to consolidate support in a substantial way. Suddenly it looked like The Rules Guardians may not be getting their way anymore, that the election would be much tighter than previously thought.

The local mood of change also seems to be supported by a more global version of this theme. Suddenly, the world wasn't as afraid of change as it was, just four years ago. Just at the end of last year there was a change of government in Australia resulting from an optimistic campaign for leadership change. This year, all eyes will be on the US, where President Bush's term must end, and the two parties will once again fight for the presidency. Whilst four years ago many observers openly doubted if the Democrats were relevant anymore, now they are more favoured to win than Bush's Republicans. What a change of fortune. Angelle wondered if the same could happen here. One presidential candidate in particular, a man by the name of Barack Obama, appeared to particularly embrace this mood of change, with considerable success. 'Hope' and 'Change' are what he is all about, it seems. Can Angelle and her team learn anything here?

Angelle is now more determined than ever to expand her team on Heirs Council, after one year of being the lonely MHC who had to leave her friends behind to attend the monthly meetings, and who made no friends at the Council because everyone else saw her as an opponent to be extinguished. She had been studying Obama's 'hope and change' campaign, to see if she could learn anything. The more she looked into the campaign, the more she was convinced that she was on the right path, with her new style of simple messages that give people hope. But one thing was missing, and that was money. Obama's 'hope and change' campaign cost a huge amount of money to run, and it was simply beyond someone like Angelle to fundraise anywhere near that much, even adjusted for the much smaller scale of an Heirs Council campaign rather than for a national election.

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"I have a big idea. I want to run something like Obama's Hope and Change campaign, for this year's election. There's a mood of change out there, here in Pacificland, as well as in the rest of the world, and we have to ride on this wave," Angelle said.

"So go for it! I know you can do it!" Katie said.

"But I do have one problem, and that's money. You see, even in this new world, money is required for everything. And we just don't have enough of it," Angelle said.

"How about the internet? That's been one of your strengths so far, and a viral video would be so 2008," Mandel said.

And that was how Angelle decided to embrace the internet video as the next 'secret weapon' of her campaign. The success of 'viral videos', videos that spread like viruses on the internet,

can be said to be one of the biggest cultural changes of the last few years. The rapid uptake of broadband internet in the earlier part of the decade had enabled videos to be broadcasted over the internet with acceptable quality, and several websites dedicated to hosting videos then started up to further enable people to create and share video content. As a result, while the ability to broadcast your message via video used to be restricted to very few people up until even just a few years ago, nowadays even individuals with not much help have been able to create videos that have been shared and viewed many thousands of times.

Angelle decided to make a video for each of her key messages, explaining what they are. Successful videos tend to be short, so she decided to set a time limit of three minutes for each video. She made a total of seven such videos, and linked them up to the Team Princess Spirit website and social media

profiles. Everything was pure trial and error at this point, since none of Team Princess Spirit had ever made an internet video before. Angelle hoped that it would work, but really couldn't be sure.

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A week had passed, and only several dozen people had seen the videos. Which was far from success, from a 'viral video' perspective. Angelle did not like it, but it wasn't a surprise. It was trial and error after all, and now it is time for a second attempt.

"As my trusted adviser, what do you think I should try next?" Angelle asked Natalie.

"How about we look at what viral videos have in common?" Natalie suggested.

"How should we go about that?" Angelle asked.

"We should probably start by looking at some viral videos," Natalie said, showing Angelle a listing of the top 100 viral videos of 2007.

"We probably can't do cute kittens. It would distract from our campaign," Angelle said.

"I agree there," Natalie said.

"And we don't want to talk about any celebrities, local or foreign. It is unwise to associate ourselves with any of them, especially as you don't know what they would do later on," Angelle said.

"Good point," Natalie said.

"I'm also not up for dressing up in weird costumes, or lip syncing to music. That would send the wrong message about me," Angelle said.

"I also agree with this," Natalie said.

"So what can we do, then," Angelle asked.

"Don't you see? It's all about doing something special, and something that people want to talk about with others. It doesn't have to involve kittens, celebrities or costumes. Those are just examples of this broader theme," Natalie said.

"Once again, you are the smart one," Angelle said. "But what special thing can we do, that hasn't been done before?"

"I think we need time to think. Give it a few days' thought and we may have an answer," Natalie said.

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Campaign season is still quite a long way off, but invites for debates are already going round. This was the most important election season for Heirs Council in decades, after all. The

trouble for Angelle is that Team Princess Spirit had received none. After that debate that never was with The Rules Guardians, none of the other teams want to debate Team Princess Spirit, as they cannot be sure whether there was something wrong with Angelle and her team that caused their opponents to withdraw so suddenly. Of course there wasn't, but it's something they won't just take Angelle's word for.

"We need to demand a re-debate with The Rules Guardians," Katie said.

"But how can we do that?" Daniel asked.

"It's not like they would entertain our request. It would just look dumb," Mandel said.

Angelle suddenly had an idea.

"We should use the force of popular demand to make them re-debate us. The people out there want to see such a debate, I think," Angelle said.

"How can we do that?" Katie asked.

"By our new secret weapon. The viral video," Angelle replied.

Chapter 18
The Re-Debate

"Supreme Court Invalidates King's Midterms", read the front page headlines. Apparently, King Jashor's 2006 legislation to create midterm elections for Heirs Council was invalid, according to the Supreme Court of Pacificland, as such a change would have required a referendum. King Jashor has already announced that he is not interested in running a referendum, and will abide by the court ruling. In turn, this means that all seats will be up for re-election in this year's election, including Angelle's.

The game is suddenly harder, and the stakes are suddenly higher for Angelle. Still, nobody ever promised that the work of a Princess would ever be easy, she told herself. Now is also not the time to get negative. For as she

had expected, the video-based campaign to get The Rules Guardians to offer a re-debate became sort of viral, and yesterday The Rules Guardians' president finally reluctantly agreed to a re-debate, to be held next week. Angelle didn't know what they were going to throw at her this time, but staying positive was the most important thing right now.

Better to focus on happier thoughts. Like the conversation she finally managed to have with her mother yesterday, a pre-debate conversation like the one they had four years ago. Last time Angelle pretended to just support things like gay rights for electoral advantage, but yesterday she made it clear that her heart was really in it. And to her surprise, her mother said that she now agreed with everything in Team Princess Spirit's platform. Angelle knew that her mother was not one to change her mind easily, and therefore the campaign was at least sort of working.

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The hall was filled with people as Angelle and her team entered. The sight of Purple and Yellow on one side and White and Dark Blue on the other was sort of familiar. It looked just like how it was four years ago. No, it actually didn't, because both sides were full of people, unlike last time. This was a good sign, Angelle thought. Still, she couldn't rule out The Rules Guardians playing other tricks this time.

Angelle took her seat on the stage. She noticed that Jenelle was her opposite, the leading representative of The Rules Guardians in this debate. She also noticed that Jenelle seemed to have a particular kind of smile on her face that spelled trouble.

Angelle waited. And waited. Like an eternity. She began to wonder if something was wrong again.

Finally, someone else walked onto the stage. It was a tall, thin young man, with short black hair, someone Angelle seemed to have seen before. Somewhere. He walked to the microphone.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. My name is Robert, and I am the moderator of this debate. I will be asking the questions, and the candidates on both sides will be giving you their answers," he said.

Angelle suddenly realised that Robert was, in fact, Jenelle's boyfriend. This wasn't going to be a fair trial.

"We're already running late, so let's begin. Question one. Just a few days ago, voters in the US state of California voted against gay marriage, in a referendum. In fact, every time there has been a referendum on the issue, anywhere in the world, gay marriage has lost. From reading the platforms of the two teams here tonight, we know that the issue of gay marriage is one where they do not agree. Given the overwhelming consensus out there against gay marriage, why should there be a disagreement on this issue between the candidates at all? The coin flip done before this debate began determined that The Rules Guardians will speak first," Robert said.

What a loaded question, Angelle thought.

Jenelle started speaking.

"Mr moderator, what you have said is very true, and it just points out how the values of our team are the values of the majority,...

Angelle really couldn't stand the self-righteousness in this inherently disrespectful and divisive speech. She knew what Jenelle was going to say anyway, so she decided to just shut it out.

"Now, let us hear from Team Princess Spirit," Robert said.

"Mr moderator, may I firstly say that I cannot agree with the word you used, the 'overwhelming consensus' against marriage equality for same-sex couples. In the recent Californian vote, the margin was just 52-48,

after all. Hardly an overwhelming consensus. Besides, new ideas take time to be digested by society, and people can change their minds gradually. The vote may flip the other way, if taken a few years later.

"But what's most important is the question of what kind of society we want to be. Do we want to be a society that treats people differently based on their status as a minority? Do we, as a society, allow a so-called tyranny of the majority? A real Princess would never allow that. A real Princess would side with the oppressed, no matter how few they are, and how many the oppressors are. As such, my team, Team Princess Spirit, must stand up for the equal dignity and rights of same-sex couples, whether the majority out there agree with it or not," Angelle said.

Jenelle suddenly leapt to her feet.

"Did you just call us tyrants and oppressors? That's disrespectful of you," Jenelle said. "Mr moderator, I demand that she be censured for this!"

"I'm afraid I'm not in a position to judge whether a response is disrespectful or not," Robert said.

"Well, then, this will be an unfair debate. And we cannot partake in unfair debates. Therefore, we should go," Jenelle said, and then led her team off the stage.

"Don't worry, you did nothing wrong," Natalie said.

"I know. But most people are too busy to look at the details, and perception is everything. Given the media, both at this school and in the outside world, are often supportive of The

Rules Guardians, I have a bad feeling of how everything will be reported," Angelle said.

"You do have a point. But don't forget that we now have citizen journalists and bloggers, many of whom will analyse what really happened and tell people the real story. Never underestimate the power of citizen journalism," Natalie said.

Angelle saw just a glimmer of hope.

Chapter 19

Team Angelle Can Do It

"Let's go home and watch the results, whatever they may be," Angelle said to her team as the polls closed, after a long day running between more than a dozen important polling stations.

"No, let's go to the Convention Center," Natalie said.

"Why?" Angelle asked.

"Well, your results party is there, of course," Natalie said.

"I'm actually not in the mood for jokes, sorry," Angelle said.

"We're not joking. Your parents paid for half of it, and we paid the rest, together. It's going to be one of the greatest nights of your life, of our lives, after all," Katie said.

It turns out that Team Angelle, as well as Angelle's mom and dad, were so confident that this would be a great result, that they booked the great hall of the Convention Center to celebrate, even before election day actually happened. Their confidence was based on late opinion polling which showed a very positive reaction to Angelle's strong stance in support of marriage equality at the debate, as well as disgust over The Rules Guardians walking out on her again. Of course, Angelle wouldn't know yet, having decided to not look at the polls in the last few weeks.

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Angelle sat in front of the big screen, nervous as the results came in. Not far away, her friends were preparing for a great party, but she didn't know what they were doing, being so absorbed.

After what seemed like an eternity, the seat count for Team Princess Spirit finally ticked over to one. Angelle was relieved, at least she kept her own seat. But she didn't want to appear too happy, after all none of her team have won yet.

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By ten o'clock in the evening, it was clear that The Rules Guardians had lost half of their seats, and will not get to decide the next leadership. There were celebrations across town. The Rules Guardians was crumbling just four years after its very successful debut. This was really change that was happening, and happening fast.

Of course, one of the biggest celebrations was here at the Convention Center. Team Princess Spirit had won six seats, something beyond Angelle's wildest dreams. Angelle will now be joined by Natalie, Mandel, Katie, Jordan and Daniel at the Council.

"We did it! We did it!" Natalie screamed.

"I am so proud of you," Angelle's mom said.

In the background, the election analyst was giving his views on the results.

"You know, it was that debate that changed everything. Before that evening, The Rules Guardians looked certain to win at least a majority, and hence control the next leadership. It all came undone for them when they walked out of that debate. Liberal or Communitarian, Conservative or Progressive, nobody likes people who don't play fair,

nobody likes people who pull stunts when serious debate is actually warranted. Their support went in all directions, mostly to more moderate conservatives.

"As for the other side of the debate, Team Princess Spirit, they got a late boost. Previous polling suggested they would win only one to two seats, but tonight they won six. Of course, part of it was that people do like someone with the guts to stand for their own beliefs. But the issue of gay marriage itself, whilst probably still controversial in the electorate as a whole, is becoming increasingly popular amongst young people. And things are changing. After all, Prop 8 in California only won by 52-48. We may indeed be on the verge of major change. Looking at the trend, I can almost predict that gay marriage will be a reality here in Pacificland as well as in many other countries in ten years' time, if not less. I know it's a bold prediction to make, but here's where I will put my money."

It was time for Angelle to give one final, short speech.

"I really have to thank all of you. You're all so great, I wouldn't be here without you.

Today has been beyond my wildest dreams. It's one of those moments where I am glad that I did not give up earlier.

That the debate went well for us, I would never have guessed. I actually expected the opposite, you know. But I just had to stand up for what I believe is right, and that's what we will continue to do."

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It was now three in the morning, but Angelle was still so excited she couldn't sleep. So she took her diary out, and began to write.

"Dear diary,

Today is Victory Day for myself as well as for my team. I need to write this down so I can remember how I feel, during hard times that will inevitably come in the future.

It's still a long road ahead. I mean, my goal is still to become Cultural Royalty one day, and that will be a long road. Though six seats technically mean that I am more than halfway there. We have to keep those seats until I am over 25 and also win more, though.

But nowadays I am also interested in more than just becoming Cultural Royalty. I want to help change the Council, this country, and even the world. There's so much that needs to be changed, but a Princess never gives up, right?

But for now, I will celebrate, and take some time out from all this.

And here's a song to capture how I feel right now:

'Love is All Around Us

Forget that day I was so sad

Why did it have to be this way

I thought we'd all understand by now

What's good for us, what is not

Sometimes I felt so powerless

It seems as if we were in

The hands of a fate teasing us

And there's no way we can win

But today that seems so far

From where we are

From this splendid view

Love is all around us

And today it's all over

All the wind and the storms

We have sailed through all of that

And from here we can go anywhere

Often it was two steps forward

Then came the wind swept us miles back

Then we fought more, then further we slipped

Any moment it could all fail

It took five years of our life

In which we did achieve nothing

They said we were wasting our time

But we refused to listen

But today that seems so far

From where we are

From this splendid view

Love is all around us

And today it's all over

All the wind and the storms

We have sailed through all of that

And from here we can go anywhere'

Love,

Angelle,

4 December 2008."

Chapter 20

The New Council

For Angelle, walking to the pickup point for Members of the Heirs Council (MHCs) had become just another fortnightly thing in the past two years. But today, for the first meeting of 2009, something was different. In her hand was the purple and yellow leader's flag of the Princess's Spirit Party. She was the leader of a team of six: Deputy Leader Natalie, Mandel, Katie, Jordan, Daniel, and herself. As they walked together, Angelle could feel her friends being both excited and anxious, yet wanting to show neither, as that would be unfitting for their new status as MHCs.

"So here comes the late MHC," Jenelle shouted, as Angelle and her team walked near. Angelle had never been late again for the pickup, but

that nickname had somehow stuck. Jenelle simply had a way with being mean.

"Guess what, we're a team now!" Natalie shouted back.

"Well, our team appears to be larger," Jenelle said, as she held out the white and dark blue leader's flag of the now re-named Grand Heritage Party. "G-H-P! G-H-P! G-H-P!" she shouted, and fifty or so people shouted back the same in unison.

"What? She's their leader now?" Katie said, surprised.

"Must have pulled some strings. She has a rich dad, you know," Mandel said.

"I don't think it matters who's their leader anyway, now that they are only a team of fifty, might I add, stupid people. The smart ones appear to have all lost their seats or defected," Jordan said.

As Angelle's pre-booked minivan pulled into the station, the team got in. They could have gotten individual state cars instead, but Angelle decided that it would look better to go together as a team. Besides, this was also the environmentally friendly thing to do, something the rising Green Party would surely appreciate, providing a better prospect for future alliances. Angelle, as the leader, sat in the front.

After twenty minutes or so on the motorway, the minivan turned into the familiar tunnel, its now familiar entrance a welcome sight for Angelle. As Angelle had now seen so many times before, the minivan navigated a series of interconnected underground tunnels, then suddenly came to a stop, in front of a giant door made of two huge metal panels.

"Agent ID and fingerprint please," announced a robotic voice.

Angelle's driver waved his ID in front of a card reader, and then proceeded to imprint his thumb on the attached fingerprint reader.

"Permission granted," the robotic voice announced.

The metal doors slid open, and revealed the giant lift, a sight that once seemed like out of movie to Angelle, but the novelty had long been lost. The car drove into the lift, and Angelle could feel it being lifted up gradually. And then it stopped. Before she knew it, the car door was being opened up.

"Welcome, the Princess's Spirit Party," a young man's voice said.

They walked together along the long Heirs' Path, laid out with red carpets just like the first time Angelle was here. "I guess I'm lucky that they finally abolished the tradition of having us carry the family flags. It would have been heavy to carry six at a time," the young man said.

"Wouldn't they have provided a few helpers in that case?" Natalie asked.

"I don't think so. In this economy they are looking to cut costs anywhere. Which is why the family flags are gone in the first place," the young man said. "Even the red carpet is of a lower quality this year."

Angelle looked down. The carpet did look shabbier than the one that welcomed her in 2007. Nobody could really blame them, though. Welcome to the Global Financial Crisis, where financial institutions almost go bankrupt and countless people lose their jobs weekly. The quality of the carpet should be the least of concerns at this time.

As they walked into the Great Hall, Angelle noticed that the golden chairs were gone, replaced by plastic ones. She recalled something about the government selling off some gold melted from traditional chairs in multiple venues to fund an economic stimulus package at the end of last year. The young man took Angelle and her friends to a row of seats in the middle of the hall, on the left side.

"Here are your seats," he said.

"But don't the new members get to sit in the front row?" Angelle asked.

"With the new seats, the King has decided that there will now be a new seating plan," he said.

"But why are we assigned here, rather than anywhere else?" Jordan asked.

"Well, this is the left half, where the King has decided to place what he described as the opposition or the rebels. Apparently, that's what he thinks you are," he said.

"But that's unfair," Daniel said.

"King Jashor doesn't play fair," Natalie reminded them.

"Why are we in the middle, then," Angelle asked.

"I've heard that the more of a bad influence the King thinks that you are, the further to the back you are assigned. So the King must reckon that you lot are sort of OK, and you should be grateful," the young man said.

"I would take being placed on the left by Jashor as a badge of honour," the young man whispered before walking away.

Angelle could now see that Jenelle and her team were walking, triumphantly, to the very front row of the right side.

*****

Prince Jason walked across the podium, to where there was a microphone stand. The house fell quiet.

"Good morning ladies and gentlemen," he began.

"I am Prince Jason of House Wetlands. As you know, today is my last day at the Chair of the Council. So our main item of business today will be to elect a new Chairperson," Jason said.

"But first, I have an announcement for the inauguration of new Cultural Royalty. As you know, anyone in this Council over the age of 25 and has collected ten signatures from fellow MHCs can nominate. But during the nomination round of 2008, there were 55 nominations, and we can only create five new Cultural Royals per year. As Chairman, therefore, I have had to use my discretion to select this year's new Royals, as had been the case for the past 45 years consecutively. May I present to you, Prince Carlton of House Lang, Prince Vincent of House Rue, Princess Millie of House Lee, Prince Rickard of House Bonville, and Princess Tina of House Dinar!"

The five walked out from the backstage, and took their seats on stage. At least these 'thrones' haven't been melted and sold too, Angelle thought. Jason proceeded to crown them one by one. There was polite applause after each crowning.

"Now, to the matter of the new Chair. The candidates will come on stage and introduce themselves. There are a total of three candidates. After they speak, you will be given a ballot paper, on which you should number your preferences from 1 to 3. Without further delay, I invite the candidates to come on stage. Let's welcome the first candidate, Jenelle of House Lacey!"

Chapter 21

A Hung Council

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Jenelle, and I would be honoured to serve you as Chairwoman of the Heirs Council. But first, I know you must give your confidence in me. Here are three reasons why you should vote for me.

Firstly, I am the leader of the largest party in the Council. The Chair has traditionally been the leader of the largest party, and for good reasons. The largest party in the Council is the party that received the highest number of votes in the election, the first choice of the biggest number of people. Having the Council led by the leader of this party would mean a respect for the democratic mandate. Moreover, having a Chair with a big bloc of support ensures stability. This should be very important,

especially when the Council itself now has many minor parties.

Secondly, I believe I have the ability to ensure the financial stability and viability of the Council, more than the other candidates. Our party is well liked by business and the government, and we are on talking terms with many business leaders and government ministers. This means that, under the leadership of our party, we are more likely to secure both government funding and private sector donations. This will be very important in the tough economy out there.

Finally, the most important thing is that my leadership will mean the council continues to stand for the values my party and myself have always been strong about. As you may have seen during that debate in November last year, enemies of tradition are ready to use name-

calling and even tricky means to advance their agenda, against the wishes of the majority. As in that debate, I will have none of that. My leadership will mean that the Council will have none of that either. Elect anyone else, and they may even be a puppet of Angelle Easterner, carrying out her radical agenda for her."

"Are you allowed to use personal insults during these speeches?" Jordan said, almost angry.

"I guess they call this freedom of speech," Mandel said.

"I don't care, she can't destroy me," Angelle said. Actually she didn't mind being mentioned by Jenelle at all. Of the two hundred people here, potential new Chairwoman found her the most worthy adversary. That must be quite an honour.

"Now let us welcome the second candidate, Lucy of House Autumner," Jason said.

It took almost forever for Lucy, a tall and skiny brunette with glasses, to walk onto the stage, as she was seated at the very back section of the left side.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Lucy, and I would be honoured to serve you as Chairwoman. I know that there are three candidates for you to choose from tonight, and I will make a very simple case of why you should choose me.

Jenelle Lacey found her way onto this stage easily, as she was seated just in front of it. I have however been placed at the very back of this room. Why? The King regards me as an enemy, that's what I have heard. Why would I

be regarded as an enemy by King Jashor? The reason is simple. I am the leader of the largest party opposing his agenda to control the Council as part of his government. While there are many minor parties elected in this Council, they are all too young and too small to be of any real force to oppose his agenda. The 50-year-old Real Democracy Party and our red and orange flag are Jashor's biggest obstacle to taking over this place. But I'm not his only enemy. In fact, the King regards most of us as enemies. As you can see, the left side, where he has placed his enemies, is a whole three rows bigger than the right side, where he placed his friends, including Miss Lacey.

Miss Lacey suggested that I may as well be a puppet for some lady named Angelle. I haven't heard of that name and I don't know what she's all about, so that's ridiculous. But I know what Miss Lacey is all about. Make no mistake, a vote for Jenelle Lacey is a vote for King Jashor to

take over this council. He has already sold the golden chairs and changed the seating plan. What's next up his sleeve? You don't want to find out too late. Vote for me and I will stop him in his tracks."

"Not another insult," Katie said.

"Free publicity is not that bad, really," Angelle said. Frankly she didn't really like being used as a political football, but she didn't want her team to get too down.

"Now, for the third and final candidate, Peter of House Waters," Jason said.

Peter was apparently seated in the second row of the left. So an enemy of the King still, but less of one.

"Ladies and gentlemen, my name is Peter, and I would be so very honoured if you elect me as your new Chairman. But why should you choose me? The answer is clear and it lies in this very Council itself.

Both ladies who went before me mentioned that there are many minor parties in the Council today, as if that is a bad thing. But people are sick and tired of the old establishment forces, which if I want to be frank, both of them work for. The two sides may have been at war for decades, even centuries, but people like myself and other independents and minor party members are not interested in that. All we are interested in is the good governance of this Council, to provide good outcomes for young people out there, doing it tough in this economy.

Miss Autunmer may pretend to be less establishment, less out-of-touch because she is from the left side, and the King has even placed her at the back. But the truth is that she is just as out of touch. She says she has never heard of Angelle Easterner. Well, the reason is because she doesn't care about minor parties or everyday people. All she cares about is her side of the establishment. Miss Lacey is even worse, implying that independent candidates like myself may as well be puppets of other people. I am no puppet, and none of us are puppets of any other. We all work together for the common good. Miss Lacey works for our current King, Miss Autumner works for the other guy who wants to be King, but I work for you."

Yellow ballot papers were handed out. The hall descended into loud chatter, as people began to discuss with their fellow party members how to vote.

"You're our leader, so you should tell us how to vote," Katie said.

"It should be a group decision, and I would also like to hear from my advisor and deputy," Angelle said.

"I think we should vote for Peter, because he is least dismissive of us naturally. And then we should of course place Jenelle last," Natalie said.

"I think I agree with your reasoning. Any objections?" Angelle said.

*****

Prince Jason appeared on the stage again.

"The results are in," he said. "First, let us look at the first preference votes. The results are: Lacey, 42%; Autumner, 36%; Waters, 22%."

There were cheers from Jenelle's camp.

Surely this can't be it, Angelle thought.

"Since we don't have one candidate with a majority, we had to do a bit of math here. For every first preference, a candidate was awarded with two points. For every second preference, a candidate was awarded with one point. The results are: Lacey, 193 points; Autumner, 174 points; Waters, 233 points. Thus I announce that Peter of House Waters has been elected as your new Chairman, with his role commencing at the next meeting," Jason said.

There was applause. But through the noise Angelle could hear Jenelle scream that "it's not fair" and something like "that's not how the alternative vote works". Serves her right, Angelle thought.

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Actually, Angelle herself didn't know exactly what had happened. She knew that in a conventional 'alternative vote' or 'preferential voting' system, Peter would be first eliminated and the second preferences from his votes would be counted. But this apparently wasn't what happened.

She had to check the newspapers the first instance she could get hold of a computer. Luckily, these days they are everywhere, and surely enough, Natalie had one with her.

"Lacey Robbed in Hung Council's Chair Election," the headline went. What's a 'hung council', Angelle thought. She read on.

Angelle learnt that the rules stated that in case there was no clear winner from the ballot, the outgoing Chair was to have discretion in producing a 'fair outcome'. The commentators believed that Jason did what he did precisely to prevent Jenelle becoming Chairwoman. Jason has finally showed his political colours, to the dismay of the conservatives.

But the most important thing was that it was clear that there was a so-called 'hung council', with neither establishment candidate having majority support. The term is supposed to have come from the tradition of describing election results similar to this as 'hung parliaments' in

the British system. The implications, the commentators said, is that the fierce battle for control of the Council continues, and will likely play out intensively over the next four years.

Chapter 22
The Offer of an Alliance

As Angelle and her team entered the inner courtyard today, they could see a crowd congregated in the middle of the yard, with a red and blue banner that said 'Heirs Council Freedom Fighters Alliance' in bold type.

"Is there some kind of election going on?" Megan, a new member of Team Angelle, asked.

"I don't think so. The next Heirs Council election isn't until 2012, because, thankfully, there aren't midterms anymore," Katie said.

"But it does look like there's something unusual going on," Natalie said, a bit puzzled.

As they walked nearer, Angelle could see that Jenelle and her crew were actually at the center of the crowd.

"So it's Team Princess," Jenelle said.

"Don't you like to call us Team Loser usually? Finally learnt your manners?" Natalie said, sensing that something was unusual.

"You see, maybe we shouldn't fight anymore. After all, what we are here for today is to build an alliance. You see, the anti-freedom radicals are gaining ground everywhere now, and we need a strong alliance of pro-freedom people to defend our liberties," Jenelle said.

Angelle was surprised to hear this. Jenelle and her conservatives haven't ever been so all about freedom before. After all, they don't even support the freedom to marry for some couples.

"So you're all about freedom now?" Angelle asked.

"Of course, we've always been for freedom," Jenelle replied.

"How about the freedom to marry for gay couples?" Angelle asked.

"Well, that's not really a freedom, it's a socialist illusion," Jenelle replied.

"What's so socialist about it?" Angelle asked.

"You see, the word marriage simply has always been defined as the way it is, people are always free to enter marriage according to its age-old tradition. In fact, to change the way age-old words are defined is government intrusion into long held traditions, and is therefore anti-freedom. The need to redefine this age-old word has come from socialists, who insist that everything that ever existed must be equal,

even if it means the government intruding into others' freedom," Jenelle said.

"So restrictions on freedom are okay as long as they are 'traditional', as long as they are the way things have always been?" Angelle asked.

"Maybe on this one we will just have to agree to disagree. But it's okay, you and your team can still be part of our alliance, as we do have a small minority of people who think like you. I think we can still work well together on other questions of freedom. After all, just like the Tea Party, we are a broad coalition of libertarians and conservatives, pro-liberty people of every stripe," Jenelle said.

"Did you just say Tea Party? What do you mean by that?" Megan asked.

The young man standing next to Jenelle, who Angelle and team recognised to be Jenelle's boyfriend Robert, stepped up to respond.

"Hi everyone, my name is Robert, and I am a co-founder of this movement along with your friend Jenelle. The Tea Party is the movement we are inspired by. The Tea Party movement started in the US, and is itself inspired by the historic Boston Tea Party. You know, no taxation without representation. But 'Tea' itself also stands for Taxed Enough Already. They are all about fighting big government and the way it intrudes into every aspect of our lives, and so are we. I would like to think that we are bringing the Tea Party spirit to Pacificland, to Heirs Council," he said.

"And why exactly would Pacificland need its own Tea Party," Natalie said, sounding a bit disgusted.

"Just as in America, political correctness is on the rise, and freedoms are being eroded," Robert said.

"How so?" Natalie asked, unconvinced.

"Don't you feel it everywhere? And don't you see the rise of radical groups on campus, like Change the Era? CTE is openly running a campaign to make this school even more politically correct than it is," Robert said.

"But they are a small fringe group only," Angelle said.

"But they are growing. They got more seats than your team, and are even taunting you people, spreading rumours that you regret not forming an election alliance with them," Robert said.

"We didn't enter an alliance because they don't share our values. There's nothing we regret about that," Angelle said.

"Exactly. If you enter our alliance, it will show them your true colours, and end the speculation once and for all. You need to show that you have values, that CTE's anti-freedom platform is against your values, and you can do that by joining our alliance, and fighting against

their attempts to shut down freedom," Robert said.

"Wait a minute, though. Who can trust you after what you did to us in that debate?" Natalie asked.

"I'm sorry for that. Jenelle was a bit anxious on stage, that was all. But that was last year, and I promise it will never happen again," Robert said.

"So are you coming into the alliance?" Jenelle asked.

"So you want to close the deal just like this. But are YOU sorry for what happened at the debate?" Mandel said angrily, trying to challenge Jenelle.

"I AM sorry. I was anxious. I am not used to debates, after all," Jenelle said. "But it's important for all of us that you become part of the alliance."

There was a brief silence.

"If we can't convince you, then maybe your old friend Jenny can," Jenelle said, presenting Jenny, who was at the back of the crowd all along.

"You know, I had to leave you guys because my parents and our church wouldn't allow me to be with you. I've been with Jenelle these past few weeks, and I can tell you that she's actually very nice and very sincere about our liberties. And if you join our alliance, then we can be together again. There are also many people like myself in this alliance, people who were once with Team Princess Spirit, but who had to leave because of the controversies of 2004. We would all be very happy if you can join us, so we can be in the same family again," Jenny said, presenting the sign-up sheet with a pen attached.

There was another brief silence. Then Angelle apparently moved forward, wanting to pick up the pen.

"Don't!" Natalie shouted.

Angelle withdrew her hand.

"We'll think about it," she said, and motioned for her team to leave with her.

Chapter 23

A Question of Freedom

Team Angelle was now seated in the cafeteria.

"Do you guys even know what the Tea Party is?" Natalie asked.

"I had no idea until today, to be honest," Megan said.

"I heard of it somewhere, but I haven't followed the news closely, so I don't know very much about it," Mandel said.

"And Angelle, I know you are my friend and you are the leader of this party, but I have to say this. I can't believe you almost signed us up to our local version of the Tea Party!" Natalie said, getting even angrier.

"But it would have meant that we would be a family with Jenny again, right?" Daniel asked.

"I don't care. If that girl joined the Tea Party alliance, she's a traitor and she's dead to us," Natalie said.

The rest of the team stared at Natalie, in disbelief.

"Are you okay?" Katie asked, breaking the brief silence.

"Of course I am," Natalie said. "But I really couldn't believe all of you are so ignorant about the Tea Party and what it means."

"And what does it mean?" Megan asked.

"The Tea Party are a far-right movement that will destroy our future and make life difficult for all minorities. They are people who want to

take away my sister's rights, and I will not tolerate that," Natalie said.

"How so?" Megan asked.

"Well, most of them oppose marriage equality, apparently," Mandel said.

"It's not just that. In America, where most states do not have anti-discrimination protections for LGBT people, they will block such proposals. But here, they may work to repeal such protections, meaning that people like my sister may have a hard time even finding a job or finding a suitable place to live," Natalie said.

"But aren't they for 'freedom'?" Megan asked.

"They definitely do all this justified by the idea of freedom, like the freedom of everyone out there to discriminate against my sister. Anything less is not enough 'freedom' for them, apparently," Natalie said.

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Angelle had felt torn the whole day. Yes, she almost wanted to sign onto that alliance to get Jenny back. But then, Natalie was right. She could not sell out Ashley, and she almost did just that.

But it was really not just for Jenny. Angelle actually loved the idea of there being an alliance for liberty, and she had been secretly hating the way CTE had been acting as of late towards her and her team. She hated the way CTE was trying to paint her platform as a more 'cowardly' version of their own. Yes, both parties share goals in ridding this world of unnecessary wars, and of bigotry and discrimination. But the Princess's Spirit Party is fundamentally a party of liberty, because a real Princess would be respectful about the sincere wishes of everyone else, and the CTE is

fundamentally a party for the social engineering by state power of some utopia, that will not respect the wishes of those who don't agree with them. How could the two not be natural enemies, with this incompatibility in worldview? By joining an alliance for liberty, she would be showing her colours, and declaring war on CTE once and for all.

But then, some alliance based on the Tea Party probably isn't the place to be. Natalie was right, the Tea Party, though professing to be pro-freedom, appears to be made up of mainly conservatives, with many anti-gay religious conservatives in its ranks, hardly the image of freedom the Princess's Spirit Party ought to be standing for. From what Angelle has observed, the Tea Party movement often looks like an exercise in justifying and promoting conservatism using the language of liberty, like many others who had come before them in history, using and abusing the ideal of freedom

for progressive and conservative causes alike. Despite the movement saying that it is for smaller government, many of its members don't appear to have problems with exercises in big government conservatism, such as banning same-sex marriage. Unconvincing justifications for this sort of inconsistency, like the one Jenelle gave today, are commonly used. Liberty for some but not liberty for all is not liberty, and joining an alliance that willingly acts to prevent liberty for minorities is just not the right thing to do.

If anything, today's events reminded Angelle of an uncomfortable truth: the CTE isn't going to get tired of labelling Angelle and her team as cowardly CTE wannabes hiding behind the banner of freedom. Now that she's decided not to join Jenelle's alliance, she too would probably join in, painting her alliance as the real standard bearer of freedom and the Princess's Spirit Party as having CTE's agenda but justified

with the language of freedom misused, in an ironic reversal. The fact that she did something along these lines with the freedom to marry today means that the war on the 'meaning of liberty' may have already started. Play it right, and the Princess's Spirit Party may emerge as victors. But play it wrong, and they will be squeezed like the middle of a sandwich with nowhere to turn, by CTE on the left and Jenelle's Alliance on the right. The stakes have never been higher.

Chapter 24

Occupy Heirs Council

"Still not joining our Alliance?" Jenelle asked, as the Princess's Spirit Party approached the pickup point for MHCs going to Heirs Council. "You know this offer won't be valid forever."

"Not joining now, and not joining ever," Natalie said. "We don't believe in the Tea Party, simply."

"You know, by the time CTE has torn your reputation to shreds, it would be too late to beg us to allow you in," Jenelle said. "So you need to make the right choice, and do it soon."

Suddenly, a state car with the Pacificland flag on top of it pulled into the station. Since these cars are reserved for government officials, they all knew there must be something unusual happening.

An elderly man, well dressed in a suit, stepped out. He read aloud from a letter he had in his hand.

"Members of the Heirs Council,

Due to unforeseen circumstances, the King has moved an emergency motion that the Heirs Council be suspended, and the senate has also approved this motion. This means that there will be no meeting this evening, and also no meetings until further notice.

Yours sincerely,

Brad Indi,

Chief Royal Secretary."

And then he disappeared into the car again, and drove away.

*****

"Jashor can't arbitrarily suspend the Council. In fact, the Council has not been suspended by the King since the end of World War II. No other King has dared to do this, this is going too far!" Katie said.

"Unfortunately, we all know that Jashor doesn't like to play by the rules," Natalie said.

"I just wonder what he has up his sleeve this time," Megan said.

Angelle couldn't be so sure that King Jashor had just suspended the Council for no good reason as part of a political play. First of all, Jenelle and her Party looked genuinely surprised as they

heard the announcement. They normally know all of Jashor's pre-planned moves beforehand. Besides, the senate wouldn't have allowed this motion to pass, if it were without good reason.

"Lend me your computer for a minute please," Angelle said to Natalie.

"She forgot to bring hers, you can have this instead," Katie said, giving Angelle a phone. It was a 'smartphone', the new generation of portable phones on which you could access the internet. Once again, Katie is ahead of everyone else when it comes to technology.

Angelle knew in her heart that something wasn't right, but this still came as a surprise:

"Occupation Causes Heirs Council to be Suspended for the First Time Since 1945

The King has used his emergency powers to suspend the Heirs Council indefinitely. This is the first time Heirs Council has been suspended since 1945.

The press gallery only learnt of the fact that a group of about 200 people had been 'occupying' the underground entrance to the Heirs Council chambers for the past two weeks and refusing to leave, when the King explained his reasons for asking the senate to approve his emergency motion to suspend the Council. This development had previously been kept secret by the police, for security reasons.

The group, calling themselves Occupy Heirs Council, claims to be inspired by the Occupy Wall Street movement, which has also inspired many other similar international movements,

all claiming to be standing up for the 99% against the ultra-rich 1%.

'Here in Pacificland, where King Jashor's administration is totally wedded to the interests of the 1%, where they don't care about the lives of struggling people, especially the youth, it is especially important that we take action. We have chosen Heirs Council, because inside these doors every two weeks a bunch of privileged young people, supposedly leaders of the next generation, sit and discuss the one-percent's agenda, while the rest of us continue to suffer in this economy. We even know that some sort of US Tea Party-like movement is brewing in there, which will likely call for further cuts to government programs and welfare, making even more people suffer,' the group's spokesperson told our reporters.

We will continue to bring you the latest developments."

Angelle showed it to everyone else in her Party.

"I think we should go and speak to these people. We need to reach out to them before someone else like the CTE does," Angelle said.

"But isn't it dangerous?" Mandel asked.

"I don't think so. Occupy movements overseas have rarely caused much trouble," Angelle said.

"Will we get into trouble?" Daniel asked.

"They can't arrest us or give us trouble, because we're MHCs. It would look bad for Jashor," Angelle said.

"But how will we go? The state cars are all cancelled," Katie said.

"We can always get a taxi," Angelle said.

*****

"I will have to drop you people off here, as I don't have authorization to enter that tunnel. But it will just be a five minute walk to the gate," the taxi driver said.

One by one, they leapt through the barriers, and entered the tunnel. Fifty or so meters in, they found themselves in almost complete darkness, because the lights had been turned off by the authorities, as is the case whenever the Council is not meeting. Luckily, Katie's phone provided some light. While the team had been here many times before, walking on the ground in the dark was an entirely different experience. Walking through the deserted, dark tunnel actually felt like an adventure. And doing it with your friends was even more exciting.

They all knew they had to be quiet, as they didn't want to attract any attention.

And suddenly, they could see that there was literally light at the end of the tunnel. It appeared to be from quite a few bundles of fire, on the ends of torches. They were getting close to the action.

*****

It looked almost surreal at first. Not only were there many people moving about, going on about their lives, there were also makeshift beds, foldable tables and chairs, a mini kitchen and a temporary cafe, a mini library full of books, even a medical station staffed with trained nurses. These people looked like they were serious about staying for the long term.

"It's just like Occupy Wall Street," Katie remarked.

"Only that it's underground and in a cave-like environment," said Natalie, almost in disbelief.

Chapter 25

The Struggling Youth

A young man stepped up to Angelle and her friends.

"Hi, my name is Carlo, and I am the media outreach representative for Occupy Heirs Council. Which media organisation are you people from?" he said.

"We're actually not from any media organisation," Natalie said.

"What are you here for, then?" Carlo asked.

"My name is Angelle and I am the leader of the Princess's Spirit Party in the Heirs Council. These are my fellow team members," Angelle said.

"So you're MHCs? Wondering why you can't have your meeting today?" Carlo asked, raising his voice and speaking in quite a sarcastic tone.

With that, Angelle could now see a crowd of people moving towards where they were.

"The enemy is here," screamed one of them.

"Maybe we can talk?" another one seemed to say.

"Should we ... leave?" Mandel asked.

"No, stay. This won't be too dangerous," Angelle said.

The crowd were now all around them.

"Privileged people, do you know how much your College tuition and your regular pointless meetings cost us?" a young man said.

"Do you even know how much privilege you lot are in?" a young woman chimed in.

"Let's not get hostile here, at least not without proper talk first," another young man said.

"There's nothing to discuss with these people, because they know nothing of our lives. They are the 1%," a third young man yelled.

"Quiet!" Carlo yelled.

They went almost silent. Carlo apparently has their respect here.

"So by now, you lot should know that you are not very popular here. In fact, I must say, we believe the silent majority of young and even not-so-young people of this country are sick and tired of the brats of Heirs Council, and can't wait to see it abolished. I, in particular, hate this young lady called Jenelle, who after her loss at

the internal leadership election two years ago behaved as if the whole world owed her something, as if she was entitled to anything. I don't know much about you lot, but to me you look like a similar type," Carlo said.

"We're not with Jenelle's party," Natalie said.

"Doesn't make you any different though. You're all the same," Carlo said.

"You must be mistaken, for Jenelle hates us. There's even a website dedicated to the Jenelle-Angelle rivalry. Check it out if you want to," Katie said.

"You're two sides of the same coin, then. But you're really the same. Just privileged brats who think the world owes them everything," Carlo said.

"How can we be the same if we're on opposite sides?" Mandel asked.

"You're all just part of the system, part of the establishment that allocates all the privilege to

yourselves, and leaves nothing for the rest of us," Carlo said.

"But that's not what I stand for!" Angelle said, almost angrily.

"Perhaps you don't consciously know what you stand for, then," Carlo said.

"Hey, check this out!" a young man in the crowd said, pointing to his 10" tablet computer, which definitely looked too 2010s to belong in this caveman-like environment. Everyone turned and gathered around him instead.

Angelle could barely see what was going on, but she caught a glimpse that they were looking at the Jenelle vs Angelle blog. Apparently they have never even seen it before, unlike everyone at Royal College and everyone at Heirs Council.

"Does any of this matter? We don't care about these things, right?" somebody said.

"I think perhaps we can talk to these people. They do seem different," another person said.

"How are they different? I can't see it," someone else said.

"Angelle's actually, well, cool," another voice said.

A bearded young man walked towards Angelle.

"Let me speak," he said, and they all went quiet again.

"Hi, my name is Chee, and I am one of the co-founders of the movement," he said. "You see, we tend to think of MHCs as privileged people who don't care about us. But since you actually took the trouble to come down here, maybe we should talk. I believe in conversation."

"I'm glad that you are willing to talk. That's why we are here. To try and understand what's going on," Angelle said.

"And I'm glad that you seem to have an open attitude. What do you want to know?" Chee asked.

"I want to know why you are doing this. What do you think is wrong with our society?" Angelle asked.

"The short answer is, everything's wrong. The King and his government only look after the rich kids, those with both the money and the connections required to get anywhere in this economy. He tells us to start a business, but when we don't even have enough to live on and are repaying college debt too, how's that feasible? Especially in this economy, most new businesses go down in less than two years. For a rich kid it may just be a dent in their dad's savings, but for poor kids, if they somehow managed to get a loan to start the business,

when it goes under they will have a liability they can't repay for decades. I could go on and on, but you people in Heirs Council are basically set up for life, so you will not understand any of this, but the fact that you are so assured of a great life while everyone else struggles, don't you think that's unfair?" Chee said.

"But Heirs Council seats are not for life," Natalie said.

"Sure. But even if you lose your seat, then so what? A graduate of Royal College with history on the Heirs Council is not going to go without at least a great job, right?" Chee said.

This made Angelle think. Chee was right, they were privileged. But then, they were working for everyone's welfare too.

"But Heirs Council exists to work for all young people's welfare. Would you rather it not exist," she said.

"Theoretically it should. But it doesn't. It doesn't ever stand up to the King's neglect of our lives. In fact, it's always too afraid to stand up to the King. Make no mistake, Heirs Council is just another arm of the King's tyranny," he said.

"Actually, in the Council there are the King's friends on one side, and the King's enemies on the other side. We have been placed by the King himself on the side of his enemies," she explained.

"His so-called enemies. Too busy having pointless arguments with his friends to challenge what he's doing to us all," he said.

"Maybe some of them are like this. But we're different. We care about the world around us too," she said.

"You all say that, don't you?" he said.

Angelle paused to think about how she could show that she was, indeed, meaning to do something different.

"Not so different in reality, are you?" Chee said.

"Well, we can't show you anything here, right? But you can come to our Policy Conference," Angelle said.

"So you allow common people to help you make policy? For real?" Chee said.

"It's something we're starting only this year. We've only been elected as a team this term, after all," Angelle said.

"To tell you the truth, I'm still sceptical, but we may have a look at this. How many of us can go?" Chee asked.

"All of you are welcome! It's going to be at the Grand Hall of the Royal College, at, um, 6pm on um, the 1st of November 2011," Angelle said, trying to make up the details as she went along, thinking of a time when the Grand Hall would definitely be available for bookings. "Can you spread the word for me?"

"I'll definitely do that," Chee said.

"So you're hanging out with these people. You know, they're supposed to be the ones you hate. You should know you enemies, Occupiers," a voice from behind said. Angelle turned her head, and saw that a team of Change The Era 'volunteers' in their uniforms had arrived.

"Who are you?" Chee asked.

"We're Change The Era, the only party in Heirs Council that believes in real change. All others,

including this young lady's party, are no different from each other."

"You all say that, right?" Carlo asked.

"Well, look up Change The Era and our platform online, and you'll see why we are actually different. Unlike the Princess's Spirit party, whom, by their very name, is all about royal-like privilege."

"It's not! That's not what the Princess's Spirit is! You know it, and you're deliberately lying," Angelle said, angrily.

"Well, we don't want a fight of MHCs here, so maybe it's best that you both leave now," Chee said. "All you MHCs, you have to leave now. Or do I need someone to escort you out?"

Chapter 26

A Quarter Life Problem

"You should have joined us. That way, we can change the world together," one of the CTE people said, as they headed down the dark tunnel.

"But since our kind of change isn't the same as your kind, I don't think it will work this way," Natalie replied.

"What's wrong with our 'kind of change' then?"

"You propose using coercion to change people. You also don't mind ruining others' lives if they don't agree with you. You don't even believe in freedom and democracy. We can't stand for that."

"You know, all this freedom of conscience thing may sound good, but we're actually at war here, and it should be all about winning. Surely

it's better than letting Jashor and Jenelle win, right?" the CTE guy said.

"Not necessarily. You know, it may not be wise to swap one type of tyranny with another," Angelle said.

As they approached the underground highway, they could already see the CTE van parked at the entrance to the stub tunnel. As the CTE people marched towards their van, Angelle signalled her team to stay back, and walk as slowly as possible.

"They didn't let you speak to them?" a guy on the van said.

"They would have, if not for those stupid Princess people already being there first."

"Lesser-evil lesser-conservatives always ruin real progress. That's why they are even worse

than the real conservatives. I guess we have to come back tomorrow then. This takeover must happen, it will give us real profile and real leverage for the first time ever."

Angelle wasn't surprised about how the CTE guy had described them, but this was proper confirmation that they didn't ever actually see Team Princess's Spirit as allies.

"Now that they are gone, it's time to head back in," Angelle told her team.

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As Team Angelle headed back into the Occupy area, they could hear track after track of familiar music being played. Angelle noticed that it was all music that was popular around

the late 1990s. As they got nearer, Angelle also noticed that people were all getting up and dancing.

"It seems we're in luck. This time there'll be no need to negotiate, we can just dance our way into the center of the action," she said.

"I like this track," Angelle could hear someone screaming as a new track came on. Angelle gave the signal for her team to start dancing.

As expected, the crowd was so involved in the music that Team Angelle easily swam their way into the heart of the Occupy area. It was actually much bigger than they previously thought it was. And right now, the center of attention was actually a DJ with a portable DJ-ing kit, connected to several loudspeakers. This was the source of the music.

When the track stopped, Angelle stepped up to the DJ.

"So you have a request?" he said.

"Not really, Mr DJ. You see, I am new here, and I want to know why you are playing all this 90s music," Angelle said.

"So you don't have a request?"

The DJ picked up his mic.

"No further requests? Then my work here is done for now! Thank you people!" he shouted.

"By the way, you just missed out on a big party, girl," the DJ said.

"What party?" Angelle asked.

"You don't know? I see, you're really new to Occupy. Every other day at six in the evening we play some 90s music, to cheer up. Obviously we missed the last time because I was sick, so if

you arrived here in the last four days you wouldn't know what I'm talking about," he said.

"But why 90s music?" she asked.

"It all began with the 90s appreciation group. You see, the 90s appreciation group is all about 90s culture," he said.

"So there's a dedicated 90s appreciation group? Is there a dedicated appreciation group for other decades as well?" she asked.

"Of course not. The 90s were the best, simply. But it may just be our view of things," he said.

"Why?" she asked.

"I guess it was because we were kids back then, and life was easier and better. I mean, this whole 90s appreciation thing started with several guys going through a quarter life crisis and trying to get their mood up using 90s music," he said.

"What's a quarter life crisis?" Angelle asked. She had heard of a mid-life crisis, but not this one.

"It's somewhat like a mid-life crisis, but it happens in your 20s or early 30s. It's all about dissatisfaction in life, thinking that you could do better but not knowing how to get there, and often a severe fear of permanent failure. There's also the fear that the decisions you make now will trap you forever in the future, especially with everything being so hard to achieve nowadays," he said.

"And is it a common thing?" she asked.

"It's probably very common here, you know, dissatisfied people come to Occupy more than anyone else. But apparently a recent study found that about a third of young adults have similar problems. The bottom line is that, we are a generation who were raised to dream big, and yet many of us can't even do as well as our parents did back then," he said.

"So the 90s thing is like, escapism, right?" she asked.

"I guess you could say that, but I wouldn't put it so simply. You see, once upon a time, we had hope in life, and life was more, well, magical. We want to revisit the past to bring back some of this magic, I guess," he said.

This sounds like a real problem that needed solving, Angelle thought. Maybe the Princess's Spirit could help. But she needed to talk with these troubled young adults first, and maybe introduce them to the Princess's Spirit ideas.

"So you people like 90s stuff. Guess what? I love 90s stuff too. Why don't we have a 90s party some time?" Angelle offered.

"But we have Occupy now, and we can't go anywhere for now," he said.

"It would just be an evening," she said.

"Maybe it'll work, thinking about it. We do need a break from this cave-like existence," he said.

"Give me your e-mail and we can organise it together," she said.

Chapter 27

The Princess's Spirit Vision of Freedom

The Grand Hall is all decked out in yellow and purple, and Angelle and her friends are sitting on the stage, waiting for the clock to strike six, when the doors will open.

"How many people do you think are coming?" Katie asks.

Angelle can't give a confident answer. In fact, in the current political climate, she can't be sure that more than a few are interested. Still, it is important to keep team morale up.

"Maybe about half the hall?"

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Angelle's original fears were unfounded. In fact, the hall almost filled up, to her surprise. She even recognised a few faces from the Occupy movement. She couldn't tell whether this would be a good thing or not, however, as Occupy had now become synonymous with CTE.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen," Angelle began, slightly nervously.

"Welcome to the Princess's Spirit Party's policy conference. This is a process in which we invite you to tell us all about your values, concerns and aspirations, so that we can better tailor our policies to people's needs. To this end, a questionnaire has been provided on your seats, and we wish you could take the time to fill it out after my speech. Afterwards, please drop it off at the big box provided in the refreshments area. By the way, I'm also aware that many of

your friends who might have wanted to come this evening couldn't, so this speech will also be available as an online video. No serious contender in modern politics would miss doing this, I'm sure you're aware by now.

But first, I want to outline my vision, and what I am doing in public life. Put it simply, my vision has always been one of a society where people have the opportunity to live the lives they want to, and live by the values they believe in. The Princess's Spirit is all about both standing up for what you believe in, and helping others become able to do so, too.

The core of the Princess's Spirit platform lies in the idea of freedom. No, I'm not talking about the kind of freedom the Grand Heritage Party talks about all the time. Looking at the concept of freedom from a Princess's Spirit perspective, since a Real Princess must care about everyone,

our concept of freedom means we care equally about everyone's freedom. A Real Princess simply cannot accept the idea that minorities or the economically poor must naturally have less freedom. A truly free society is not just about the freedom of your boss to fire you at will or the freedom of your local cafe to refuse to serve gay people. A truly free society also cares about the freedom of individuals to not become economic slaves or to be locked out of society just because of their sexuality. Our platform therefore specifically states that we support policies to address these issues. I must admit that, just a few years ago, even I myself was unaware of the systematic disadvantage so many people faced in society. I believe that, being the privileged people that we are, many of my fellow MHCs simply don't understand the reality out there. But I have been made to understand it, and I have been moved to be passionate about the need to correct for it. Liberty for only a few is not real liberty, after all.

On the other hand, the idea of freedom also means respect for everyone's freedom of conscience. So we oppose, for example, campaigns to make people miserable or even lose their jobs just because they appear to support a different political point of view. While we may not agree with everything in life, as a Real Princess always stands up for her own beliefs, she surely understands that others would also do so. So as long as their opponents fight fair, a Real Princess would always treat them in a fair and dignified way.

Furthermore, in a truly free society, one would be able to always be true to oneself. There would be no need to take sides and be loyal to one ideological faction or another because they appear to 'treat you better' than the other factions. In a truly free society, freedom and opportunity should be guaranteed for

everyone, so there's no need for this. Therefore, our party doesn't align with one form of ideological social engineering or another, it simply represents freedom and opportunity for all. We are here to build a society of real freedom and opportunity, not to socially engineer any particular ideological utopia.

But believe me, being true to these ideals is difficult. It has always been difficult. For example, our early stances against unnecessary wars and for the freedom of same-sex couples to marry as they wish have attracted bitterness from some conservatives, even though we are not exactly getting in the way of their lives. More recently, we have often been caught in the crossfires of the culture wars, the conservatives still putting up their old objections to us, while some self-styled progressives claim that we are not doing enough for equality. But we believe that we

must achieve equality while promoting and respecting the concept of freedom too, as history has shown us that without freedom there can never be equality in any sense. Still, it is tough to be where we are. But what would a Real Princess do? She would stay true to her values and fight to the very end for her vision. So that's what we will do.

The goal of today's conference is simple: to gather your thoughts on what you think about our vision of freedom and opportunity, and to source recommendations for specific policies we should implement towards this vision. Your questionnaire responses will be very useful to us. Thank you."

There was applause. Angelle waited for the booing, but there was none.

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"Look, there's Chee and Carlo," Natalie said, as they walked towards the refreshments area on the right side of the Great Hall.

"Hi Chee, I'm glad you came. And hello to you too, Carlo," Angelle said.

"Did you like our message?" Natalie asked.

"Yes, indeed. You know, Occupy was all about real freedom and opportunity too. I hope that you will be able to achieve what Occupy could not," Chee said.

"What do you mean?" Katie asked.

"Occupy was supposed to be about freedom, and it was that way until CTE took over it. I guess our lack of structure made us vulnerable to the takeover. Anyway, by the time I quit,

Occupy Heirs Council was nothing like the way it started out," Chee said.

"So you quit?" Mandel asked.

"What else could we do? The membership had become 80% CTE by then, as their people kept joining and our people kept leaving. We started all this because the system was failing us, and we simply wanted our fair opportunity in life. It was that simple. But then, it became all about CTE's imaginary utopia. It seems that they are so dedicated to their weird utopia that they are willing to trample over our one chance to get some equal opportunity. I don't think that kind of utopia is worth having, especially if that's the price," Carlo said.

"I agree. Nobody's utopia is ever worth having, if it means actual continuing injustice to people in practice," Angelle said.

"I'm glad somebody has said that. You're an inspiration to many of us, you know? In fact, here in your audience tonight are many former

Occupiers who had also quit. I think they like your message too, although maybe some are just supporting you to get back at the party who stole their movement. Anyway, we all regret telling you to go away when you came back that day and tried to warn us about CTE's plan for hostile takeover," Carlo said.

"But, maybe this is a stupid question, but how did CTE come to control Occupy, when the two weren't that related in the first place?" Katie asked.

"I guess they set their sights on taking over Occupy early on, because we were about change and overcoming oppression and solidarity, the sort of thing they profess to be about. We were valuable to them, because we were visible, and because we were authentic. It was pure political calculation," Chee said.

"But even if they wanted to take over Occupy, wouldn't that have been difficult? You were a

big mass of people in your own right, I mean," Mandel said.

"They had all sorts of, well, techniques. First they introduced the so-called progressive stack at our daily forums, a system also used in some overseas Occupy movements. This system prioritised the speaking rights of those with less privilege, like women, people of color or LGBTs above others, and a moderator would control the speaking order based on privilege. I don't know how it worked overseas, maybe they really had impartial moderators, but in our case, the moderators were all CTE people, and in practice used it to select CTE speakers. Everyone who didn't agree with their agenda left, because we felt ignored," Chee said.

"And it wasn't just, you know, people with privilege. In fact, the first person to protest against this system was gay himself. He not only felt ignored like the rest of us, he felt angry that CTE was using his identity to support an agenda he did not personally agree with. For example,

he felt that the CTE LGBT team, who came to speak almost every day, had a completely different agenda to himself and his friends, yet they claimed to speak for LGBTs in general," Carlo said.

"Sounds like a tricky situation. Is there any way we can help get Occupy back on track?" Mandel asked.

"It's all over now anyway. Jashor has activated emergency powers, allowing him to clean up the mess Occupy has become next week. We're not sorry to see it go. We're just sorry that the emergency powers mean that Jashor's term will be extended by one year and that we can't get rid of him until 2013," Chee said.

"What?" Natalie asked, surprised.

"It was announced one hour ago, apparently," Katie said, reading from her phone.

Chapter 28

Culture Wars

There's about a year before the next elections, and the first opinion polls that came out last week did not have good news for the Princess's Spirit Party. They showed that the Grand Heritage Party and Change The Era were the two major parties at this point in the race, and Angelle's party was not even a major force. Angelle couldn't even know how her party was actually performing, as it was just included in a combined 'others' category. All she knew was that this cannot be good news.

Still, she has to do something to raise her profile, even in this early stage, to tell everyone that she is still in the race. So today, Team Angelle is going into the Inner Courtyard, raising their yellow and purple banners, and

spreading their message to whoever wants to listen.

As they entered the Inner Courtyard, Angelle noticed that there was already plenty of yelling. She became worried that, even with the help of the loudspeaker she had brought along with her, nobody would hear her properly.

"We stand with Occupy! Boycott all pro-Jashor businesses!" a voice was yelling, over and over again.

"That's CTE and Occupy gone mad! But don't worry, we will stand for freedom!" Jenelle yelled back.

"Yeah, the freedom for women, minorities and LGBT people to continue to be oppressed!" CTE shouted back.

Angelle reflected on the sad state of both Heirs Council politics and Pacificland politics more generally right now. Discussion had descended into a war-like stage, with nothing constructive being done. The people are fed up, but nothing is changing. Many people know that the Grand Heritage Party was not offering real freedom, but just their own version of 'freedom'. But the other team in this war are no better, it seems. Occupy started out being about the concerns of disaffected young people, but somehow CTE took it over, and it became part of the CTE's war machine. At first, Occupiers started encouraging the boycotting of businesses that treated their employees poorly, something in line with the whole point of Occupy in the first place, and something that quite a few people were sympathetic about. But soon after, it became all about the CTE's cultural agenda, justified vaguely as 'justice'. There was a campaign to boycott businesses that have donated to King Jashor's political party, there was another campaign to boycott businesses

that didn't employ enough women, and there was even one about voting to eliminate a reality TV show contestant who opposed same-sex marriage, as if that would be 'justice' or it would change anything at all. Many people were truly fed up. It's not that people don't care about equality or justice. It's just that many people didn't believe this to be the way to go about it.

And apparently, that was not just the state of affairs in Pacificland right now, in the early 2010s. Similar situations are now found everywhere. Europe, England, the US, Australia, absolutely everywhere. Immigration, climate policy, LGBT rights, feminism, if you can name a divisive issue, it's likely to be caught up in a state of ideological wars with no good prospect of resolution. The deep and permanent divisions have prevented both sides from finding any common ground that is necessary for a good resolution, in any case.

Angelle believes that the Princess's Spirit platform can be the best circuit breaker to all this. Real freedom and opportunity for all, genuine concern for those doing it tough, and frank and rational discussions to resolve differences are what we need now. A Real Princess would stand up and proclaim these values, and use them to unite people. Yet she has been careful to act recently, not wanting to be forced to take sides on issues, or to be forced into 'alliances' that will ultimately damage her image. Local and international experience in recent times have shown that these things can happen all too easily. In these days of media sound bites, words are often taken out of context, and ideas are often distorted. And once an impression has set in, there's no use to argue otherwise.

But one cannot hide away forever either, or one would just become irrelevant. So it's time to take a stand, no matter how high to stakes are, Angelle thought. She picked up her loudspeaker.

"Are you sick and tired of these culture wars? I am! There's an alternative: real freedom and opportunity for all! That's the only ideology we need!" she shouted, several times over, until she noticed that she was the only one shouting.

Both the CTE and the GHP had gone quiet, and people were staring at the small island of yellow and purple with Angelle in the center. For the first time in months, maybe even more than a year, there was somebody who was standing up to the 'two majors', condemning both sides for waging the war in the first place, rather than simply taking one side or the other. As Angelle noticed that people were listening to

her, she used this rare opportunity to continue speaking.

"In this world, we all have hopes and dreams. We all want an opportunity to see our hopes and dreams come true, and we all want a fair playing field to support this to happen. This state of culture war not only doesn't change anything for anybody, it creates a divided platform. A platform on which people must choose one side or the other, sometimes merely because we believe one side will treat us slightly better than the other side, even if neither will offer us true freedom to be true to ourselves, and to pursue our dreams in life. And amongst this division and war, the truly heartfelt stories of people, people doing it tough in their everyday lives, are all too easily drowned out by shouting matches like the one we've just had. But there's an alternative: why don't we just put this culture war stuff aside,

and come together to create a situation of real freedom and opportunity for all?" she said.

There was both applause and booing. Angelle couldn't tell which was louder.

"This young lady is misguided! The culture wars can't simply be imagined away. People are being oppressed. We must fight to win it!" CTE shouted.

Angelle really wanted to shout back, but instead signalled for her team to leave. She didn't want to get caught up in any more controversy. The battle for hearts and minds wouldn't be won in one day, anyway.

Chapter 29

Back in a Better Time

It's been four months since Angelle tried to organise a 90s-themed party with DJ Ken-Men-Pen, or just Ken for short, but she's still searching for the most important thing: a venue. Before Christmas all the venues were booked up by Christmas parties, but apparently in January they also close for a month or so, maybe because they had already made so much money.

"Hey, I've found an affordable place for your party," Jordan said.

"No, I found it first," Megan said.

"Okay, whatever. But do check this out, it's actually an underground shelter," Jordan said.

Angelle read the description. The shelter is in a suburb about 20 kilometers away, and is actually brand new. It was built for the end of the world. The ancient Mayans believed that the world will come to an end this December, apparently, and these people built the shelter for their paid clients to hide in come late December. Between now and then, however, it was available to hire as a venue for functions. And just for 200 dollars an evening!

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"Ladies and gentlemen,

Welcome to the 90s Spirit Party. I'm your host, DJ-Ken-Men-Pen. Thinking about it, 2012 is indeed a scary time to be in. Some people believe the end of the world is coming later this year, it is the very reason why this shelter was

built. Thankfully, there's always music, decorations, fashion and food to help us rewind back about 15 years, to the good old times," Ken said.

"But let's face it. We'll need to come back to 2012 by tomorrow morning. But don't despair yet, we've got a way to keep some of the magic of this night alive for a long time to come. There's a big blank poster on the wall on the left-hand side, where we invite you to think about what was so good about the 90s. Write down whatever comes to your mind. At the end of the night, we'll take a high resolution photo of the whole thing, and let you take it home on a USB stick for just five dollars," Angelle said.

"Without further delay, let the party begin!" Ken said, starting the music.

*****

As the other forty or so people partied on into the night, Angelle and her friends went over to the left wall, to inspect the previously blank poster, now more than half filled with written comments.

"Now, let's get down to our real business here tonight," Natalie said.

"Aren't we here to have fun too?" Katie said.

"You all know this is a marketing research exercise," Natalie said.

"Don't be so cynical, it's a bit of fun too. And I don't like the term marketing research, I prefer idea gathering," Angelle said.

They all read the poster together, comment by comment.

"It was more hopeful," read one.

"Everything was right then, everything is wrong now," read another.

"It was before the economy crashed," the next one read.

"We dreamt of such a bright future, for all of us," read the next one.

One comment caught Angelle's eye in particular: "Back in the 90s, we all got along, people could be friends. Nowadays everything is divided into factions, the social justice warriors vs the angry reactionaries, the green foot soldiers versus the climate sceptics, pro-gay versus anti-gay, the religious vs the atheists, and so on. I wish this would all end soon, and we can all be friends again."

And then there was another one: "In the 90s, battle lines were drawn on things like pop vs rock, or country vs hip-hop. Otherwise, people were friendly with each other. Nowadays, every issue is a battleground, and every opinion can be a cause for war. When will this madness end?"

"It appears to be all about being more hopeful back then, and the fact that people got along better back then," Katie said.

"That's the vibe I get too," Natalie said.

"What else would you have expected? That people simply like the 90s for its terrible fashion or its outdated computers?" Jordan said.

"The fashion wasn't really that bad, come on" Katie said.

"Should I make this the theme of my speech?" Angelle asked.

"I think it would be a good idea. Of course we should record it and have it online too," Natalie said.

*****

"Ladies and Gentlemen, attention please. Our special guest of the night, Angelle Easterner MHC, would like to give a special speech," Ken said.

"Good evening again everybody,

It's my honour to be the special guest at this great party. You know, I love the 90s too.

But what's so great about the 90s? The fashion, the music, even those outdated computers we

used to use? These things are great, well probably not Windows 98 computers, but the other things were definitely great. But what a lot of us miss is how life used to be, and what the world looked like to us.

In the 90s, the world was more hopeful. Maybe part of it is the fact that many of us were brought up with the adults telling us that we were all special, that we could do anything we want. If that's the case, then it's the fault of the system that it is failing so many of us today. On the other hand, it is a fact that the world was less divided and less bitterly resentful in so many different ways back then. Sure, there were culture wars even back then, but surely not as toxic as the ones we are having today. It's why I believe we need to rise above the current divisiveness. Remember, while things don't look that good at the moment in many ways, they don't have to be this way. The

dreams we had back then still resonate, and they still have a good chance of coming true.

Anyway, while I love the 90s too, I look forward to a future that's even better. It's why I'm in public life in the first place. To work towards a better future. And I believe, if we keep the hope alive, we will get there eventually.

Thank you."

Chapter 30

We Have More In Common Than We Think

Things are looking up for Angelle. Her recent speeches on her vision of freedom and dreams for all have been popular with quite a lot of people from many different backgrounds, and she has become a somewhat popular figure for the hopeless in society to rally around. Among the ranks of new Angelle supporters are many previous Occupiers, as well as other youth facing tough times in life. On the other hand, her message also struck a chord with those apparently doing well in life, but actually feeling limited by their circumstances, such as a less than meaningful existence or an inability to really follow their heart and pursue their dreams. And finally, there are those whose vision for life focus less on themselves and more on the wider world, many of whom who

are frustrated about the current culture war dynamics causing an inability for people to unite on their common ground and move forward together. Angelle had made it clear that her vision of real freedom would include the freedom of each of these groups to pursue their dreams, and an end to the bitter divisiveness that currently dominated society. 'We have more in common than we think' has indeed become one of Angelle's main rallying cries nowadays.

Right now, another area where common ground appears to be emerging from previously opposing camps is gaining widespread attention. The recent declaration by the conservative British Prime Minister that he supports same-sex marriage as part of his conservative values has caused a rethink of the conservative attitude towards this issue worldwide. Previously, conservatives have been mostly united in their opposition to same-sex

marriage, seeing it as an attempt by radicals to redefine a historical institution. But perhaps it has been just about same-sex couples wanting to participate in the great tradition of marriage all along. If this is the case then, why should conservatives, who value lifelong commitment and stable relationships, refuse to support them? Surely, radicals have used this cause in an attempt to discredit conservative governments, churches and even marriage itself alike, but perhaps they were always just using a cause that had never belonged to them at all? Recently there has been some further evidence of this idea. Now that the conservative case for marriage equality is being heard loud and clear, some radicals have come out to reason that, perhaps, the only case ever for this idea has been the conservative case, saying that marriage equality only serves to assimilate the queer community into the conservative institution of marriage. Angelle did her research on where people actually stood, and found that radicals were historically

uncomfortable with the idea anyway, and they felt this way all the way up to the recent turn of the century and perhaps beyond that. Meanwhile, most younger generation conservatives actually support marriage equality nowadays, and some are indeed very passionate about it.

Realising all this, Angelle has decided that she will organise her own March for Marriage Equality, under the banner of advancing the issue on common ground, and of course the whole idea of the Princess's Spirit. While there have been quite a few such marches previously, they have been organised by radical left wing groups, and more conservative sections of society have felt uncomfortable attending due to the divisive, war-like attitude of those involved. Angelle thought that her march would not only provide a new way forward on the issue, but finally provide an opportunity for those who have long wanted to support the

cause but felt uncomfortable about the radicals' marches to show their support.

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"Remember, no divisive slogans, and no verbal attacks on particular people or political parties. We are an inclusive group of people trying to achieve a common goal here, and the purpose of this parade is to show our fellow citizens that our cause has strong support from a diverse range of people," Angelle told the several hundred participants, before the march began.

Just as the radicals often do, today they marched through the city towards Central Park on a Saturday morning, carrying banners with all sorts of colours and descriptions, telling people which section of society they were representing. Angelle was right: her march had

been able to attract a much more diverse range of people than the radicals' marches. There were various ethnic groups and religious groups represented, and there were even groups representing people from the outer suburbs, all groups of people not traditionally thought to support marriage equality in significant numbers. The atmosphere was also very different: there was no feeling of an angry attitude at the rest of society here. In this march, we are the people, representatives of everyday citizens who simply want to improve the way things are.

At the conclusion of the march, a small group of young adults carrying the blue and white banner of the Grand Heritage Party approached Angelle. She was pleasantly surprised, as she thought that whole party saw her as the enemy.

"Thank you for doing this. You know, we have long supported gay marriage too. But when the issue was dominated by the far-left, it was unacceptable for us to come on board publicly. Hopefully after today, things will be different," a young man said.

"You know, there's indeed a lot of common ground we can work upon, no matter what our political and cultural affiliations are. Let's hope one day all this bitter divisiveness, all this progressive vs conservative stuff, will come to an end," Angelle replied.

Angelle stepped up to the podium in the middle of Central Park for a final speech to conclude the parade.

"Thank you all for coming along to show your support today. Together, we have shown the people of Pacificland that support for marriage

equality is widespread and diverse. We have shown that it is an issue people from many different backgrounds and walks of life want to see addressed. And while we want change, most of us want it in a positive way, making it something that brings us together rather than something that divides us.

To sum up why we are here today, I have written a song. I have deliberately tried to make it positive, unlike your typical protest song, because negativity will get us nowhere. Remember, keep up the positive attitude. This song is for all of you.

SONG"

As Angelle stepped off the podium, she saw a familiar face walking towards her. She recognised that it was Jenny.

"Angelle, thanks for doing this. And by the way, can I rejoin your group?" Jenny said.

"You're always welcome to do so, if that's what you want," Angelle said.

"You know, in my heart I have never actually left you. It was just that my conservative parents saw you as a bad influence and banned me from being part of your group. Even after I became an adult, I was scared that they would be unhappy if I rejoined. But recently I have been able to convince them that you really care about people and bringing people together, and that you don't support a radical agenda for society like they may have suspected. Please forgive me for not being strong about believing in you all these years," Jenny said.

"It's alright. Family is more important than politics. I would have chosen family over politics too, if I were so unlucky to be forced to choose," Angelle said. "Come with me, the

others are waiting in that tent over there. They will be very happy to see your return."

Chapter 31

The Great Freedom Debate

Two months out from the 2012 Heirs Council elections, things are finally looking better for Team Angelle. Polling now has them running a sort of close third behind Grand Heritage Party and Change The Era, meaning that they are one of the 'big three to watch', and that they are invited to the major parties' debate. Angelle's recent popularity among previously disaffected young people and her leadership on the marriage equality issue have given them a huge boost. Meanwhile, the GHP has started to suffer for the same reasons. Increasing numbers of young people now feel that they are out of touch, and the internal division over marriage equality is starting to hurt, especially as King Jashor is still trying his best to hold the party to his own views.

After the drama of Occupy and the increased awareness about youth issues, there has also been a new drive to get young people involved in society and politics, and to allow more young voices to be heard. As part of this new attitude, there has been a new importance attached to the Heirs Council elections. In fact, this year's major parties' debate will be held in the State Auditorium in the middle of the city, rather than in Royal College, and it will also be televised. This means the stakes have never been higher, but the opportunities have never been better either.

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Angelle couldn't believe it was really happening. Here they were, at the backstage area of the State Auditorium, with the debate to commence any time now.

"You ready and fired up?" Natalie asked.

"I hope so. To tell the truth, I'm a bit nervous," Angelle said.

"It's normal to feel this way. But I know you'll do well," Natalie said.

"Remember, we're all behind you," Katie said.

"Candidates, please proceed onto the stage and take your seats," announced a voice coming from the speakers.

Angelle walked out to the stage, trying to look as confident as she could. As the whole of the auditorium came into view, her first thought was how big this place was. It looked even bigger than it appeared on TV.

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"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome to the Great Debate for the 2012 Heirs Council elections. Tonight, we have invited the leaders of the three biggest forces in this election according to the latest polls. We bring you Jenelle Lacey of the Grand Heritage Party, Angelle Easterner of the Princess's Spirit Party, and Danielle Krad of Change The Era," the moderator announced. "Unlike previous years, we have decided to make the debate fairer and more relevant to the general public by letting our panel of journalists ask the questions. The candidates will answer the questions in a pre-determined order. So, without further delay, the first question comes from Lawrence Met of the Pacificland Liberty Daily."

"Here at the Liberty Daily we take the liberty concept very seriously. All three of you have

had plenty of things to say about liberty. So can you please give us a clear summary of your views on the idea of liberty, and how it is better than what the others have to offer?" Mr Met asked.

"We, the Grand Heritage Party, are the only true party of liberty," Jenelle began. "I don't mean to disrespect my colleagues here tonight, but how can they claim to be for liberty if they don't guarantee support for cutting the size of our government down to as small as possible? Items in their platforms call for more government intrusion, indeed. We have all sorts of proposals like anti-discrimination laws, more tax-payer money to fund health and education which will result in higher taxes, tariffs to limit free trade, and the like. There's even a proposal by CTE to severely limit free speech at all public colleges, including Royal College. I can't see how this is anything but authoritarianism."

It was Angelle's turn to speak.

"The Princess's Spirit Party will support true, practical liberty for all," Angelle began, feeling slightly more confident now, and quite passionate indeed. "The events of recent years have taught us that many people are indeed struggling out there, and without a bit of financial help they will never practically experience freedom. There are many young people out there who cannot even get a decent education and the life opportunities that come with it, without going into huge debt. Similarly, when one cannot even pay for their own health care, they effectively become a slave to anyone who can offer the money. Where's the freedom in all this? You may say people have the freedom to make themselves richer. By what? It's not like they're not willing to work. It's just that, in this economy, jobs are not always

available. You may then suggest they start their own business. With whose money do they do that?

Similarly, strong anti-discrimination laws are long overdue in Pacificland. When minorities have to face the tyranny of the majority, can you call this freedom? Many LGBT people out there have to hide in the closet just to survive, and since we the Princess's Spirit people care about everyone's freedom, we cannot just let this happen and do nothing about it. The fact that the GHP platform still opposes the freedom to marry for same-sex couples is further proof that they don't care about the freedom of certain people at all.

On the other hand, these issues aside, we are clearly for liberty. A real Princess always respects everyone else's agency and aspirations in life, and will never enslave anyone's

conscience for any grand agenda, because a real Princess actually cares about people. We support the idea of free speech, and will form an alliance with other parties to oppose CTE's proposals for bans on so-called 'cultural appropriation' and so-called 'safe speech guarantees' at colleges. We don't believe in 'safe speech guarantees' because the concept is fundamentally detrimental to human progress. Think about it. If ensuring that people feel 'safe' about your speech was ever a legitimate reason not to speak up, then nobody would ever have been able to speak up about women's rights, civil rights or gay rights in the first place, in the climate we had several decades ago. Furthermore, CTE's proposals to ban 'cultural appropriation' will lead to huge erosions in artistic freedom and the freedom of expression. Artists will live in fear that their work will be banned, especially as there is no clear line where cultural appropriation ends and intercultural inspiration begins. These examples

all show that we are indeed very strong about the concept of liberty."

Angelle hoped that she had done enough to be convincing. In her heart, she knew that her case was the strongest theoretically, but in politics, perception is everything.

"In their quest to fool us into accepting more of the status quo, both our opponents here have deliberately missed one important thing: all this talk about liberty ignores social dynamics where people are being oppressed. True liberation is where people are no longer oppressed, and only a program totally focussed on this fact like our one will bring about this," Danielle said. "You may think the GHP and the Princess Party have two very different views about liberty and society. But the truth is that they are two sides of the same coin, the so-called good cop and the bad cop. The Princess

Party offers a sympathetic ear and a slightly lesser evil set of policies, but they are still about maintaining the status quo in every way. In any case, men will still oppress women, straight will still oppress queer, and so on. In fact, if I were given the choice of only these two parties, I would rather have the GHP, because their frankness about maintaining privilege and oppression would at least make people rise up on their own."

Angelle was frustrated, and had to stop herself from yelling out 'please explain how this will be the case using clear examples' throughout Danielle's speech. However, she had expected nothing less. CTE has been about using complex and grand sounding but not actually sound theories to justify their positions, and they often mischaracterise their opponents' positions too. Encouraging a victim mentality among its followers is another classic CTE tactic. And of course they would prefer the GHP, a

more straightforward opponent, much easier to fight against.

Chapter 32

A Divide in the Pro-Equality Camp

"Candidates, thank you for your answers. Now, let's move onto the next question, to be asked by Jeremy Joh from the Pacificland National Express," the moderator said.

"The issue of same-sex marriage is a hot topic right now, especially among young people. Can you please outline how your party perceives this issue, and what your actual approach to it is?" Mr Joh asked.

Angelle was to speak first in this round.

"I have long been a strong supporter of marriage equality, and so has my party. In fact, we have paid heavy political prices for our

stance in the past decade. For us, equality before the law and the freedom to access marriage as you and your cultural or religious community sees fit is non-negotiable. A government policy against same-sex marriage is both a denial of rights against gay couples, and a favouring of one religious doctrine over another.

To achieve equality and do so satisfyingly for our society, we need to bring people together. This is an issue where a diverse range of people, from different backgrounds, of different cultures and religious beliefs, and in living in very different social settings, all want to see progress on. The challenge is to unite everyone around a common goal, and still make sure there is enough space for every voice here.

In my recent work to advance marriage equality, I have had many people come up to

me and tell me that they have, for some time, been supportive of marriage equality, but have been scared away by the common view that this is a somehow radical change to society. A more inclusive and less divisive approach has meant that more and more people have seen the truth, that this is a simple change that will affect only 2% or so of the population, and nobody else, while making our society a much fairer and freer place for all."

Angelle was happy that she was given the opportunity to say all this. It was important to spread this message and put it on record, as many times as possible, she believed.

"Of course CTE supports marriage equality. In fact, we have had nine rallies on this issue, and the Princess Party has only held one. Angelle is also right that our approach is very different. In

fact, I am concerned about the Princess Party's approach to this issue.

Marriage equality is great and necessary, as part of making things equal and ending oppression. But if we make it about assimilation and conformity, then I'd rather not have it. If achieving marriage equality means that we must bend to the wishes of religious groups and the conservative ideals of family values, then I'd rather wait until society is ready for change on our terms instead. We therefore do not welcome the so-called conservative case for marriage equality.

Angelle is both right and wrong when she says that marriage equality is a minor change. If we achieve it on her terms, it will be a minor change, a waste of a revolutionary moment. But if we achieve it as a revolution to marriage and society and a final rejection of conservative

values, then it would be a real game changer. Unlike the Princess Party, we would rather wait for real change than take breadcrumbs from the conservative table," Danielle said.

"Danielle, thank you for being honest about the intent of the gay marriage movement all along. It was never about equality or freedom. It is about destroying marriage and our sacred family values, about using a seemingly minor change to radically transform society. And in this transformed society controlled by the likes of CTE, there will definitely be less freedom. Therefore, gay marriage, far from being a reform for freedom, is actually a trojan horse against freedom," Jenelle said.

Angelle couldn't hold herself back any longer. She leapt forward and began speaking passionately.

"Both the radical hijack of marriage equality and the conservative objections based on the radical hijack have more in common than they would like to admit: both camps only care about having ideological arguments, and they don't really care about people's lives. We are talking about real couples who have been waiting for, in some cases, decades to get married. It's not about ideology, it's about freedom for all, it's about compassion, it's about humanity. I'm sick and tired of those treating this issue like a political football!"

Chapter 33

Visions for Our Future

"I would like to remind candidates that speaking out of order is not allowed. I will not give any more warnings. Our third and final question comes from Mariam Lind of the Pacificland Federal Herald," the moderator said.

"Young adults are the future guardians of our society. As such, I would like to hear what vision you, as young adults yourselves and as representatives of many other young people in our society, have for our future," Ms Lind said.

"Our vision is one of true liberation and justice for all. There are all kinds of oppression around us that people, including the currently oppressed, do not even know about yet. This is because they have not tasted true liberation

and justice. But to achieve this true liberation and justice, we first need to radically transform society. This is what Change The Era stands for," Danielle said.

"So-called progressives, including both of my opponents here tonight, like to claim that people are oppressed and want different things, when it's actually not the case. Even Danielle here has admitted that people 'do not know' about the kind of oppression CTE says they are experiencing. Well, guess what? If people don't feel like they are being oppressed, then maybe they just aren't. People want to live in societies guided by traditional values, and have their traditional liberties protected from intrusion by radicals. If this is what you want, then the Grand Heritage Party is your best friend. This is why we have performed so well in past elections," Jenelle said.

Angelle was lucky to be able to have the final word of the whole debate. She knew this could be make or break.

"Unlike both other candidates here tonight, I do not have a one-size-fits-all future intended for everyone. People should be free to pursue their lives according to their values, their consciences and their aspirations, and ideas should be allowed to compete in an equal playing field, so the best will eventually win out. It is inappropriate to centrally enforce radical change on society telling people this is what they surely want, just as it is inappropriate to centrally enforce one conservative vision. Even among people with the same kind of values and outlook in life, there are likely to be issues where they differ, like the current division over marriage equality among conservatives. We propose that people be free from having to compromise their consciences so that we can have a conformist society. Instead, we propose

that everyone should be able to show the world why their values are great, and only a truly free market of ideas will offer this chance.
Therefore, I am proud to say that the Princess's Spirit Party has no ideological outlook, other than to help everyone, including both the establishment and the radicals, and both the privileged and the disadvantaged, the chance to live out their aspirations," she said.

Chapter 34

It's Make Or Break

Angelle was feeling nervous as she and her team were on their way to Liberty Hall, the venue they had booked for election night. This time, it's either make or break. She could score enough nominations to become Royalty, or she could miss out, which may mean she will never see a better chance again.

"Don't worry, we'll do well. The polls have us in the top three," Natalie said.

"But the last polls were taken a week ago, before my final speech and the surrounding controversy," Angelle said.

"That was a masterpiece. It was a game changer. You should be proud of it," Katie said.

"I guess it represents what I want to say. I just don't know how it will be received out there," Angelle said.

Angelle was referring to a final speech she had given just two days ago, in which she said that she had never been enemies with 'conservatives', that she welcomed everyone into her tent and hoped that everyone can work together. In essence, this had always been true. She had never sought to be enemies with the pro-Jashor forces, it was just that they marked her out as an enemy. She had never sought to oppose the conservatives' agenda for the sake of opposing, she was just standing up for minorities who would suffer under that agenda, and standing up for liberty at a time when conservatives were hellbent on taking it away. And if now the 'conservatives' are changing, so should her attitude to them. Her vision wasn't a world permanently divided for the sake of division. This wouldn't be the way of

a truly worthy Princess. The Princess's Spirit is about working for the welfare of all, after all.

Of course, this has brought accusations of 'selling out' and 'pandering to the enemy'. CTE is, as expected, leading the witch hunt. Not only because Angelle is one of their major opponents in this election, but also because they can paint themselves as the only 'true progressives'. Right now, not only in Pacificland but also in many other parts of the world, many young people out there are sick and tired of the past three decades of conservatism, and would embrace anything that looked like 'truly progressive'. Angelle is worried that being seen as 'selling out' would play out badly among this growing population, whether this perception actually represents reality or not.

Still, she has no regrets about taking the stances she has taken. Just as she had believed

almost a decade ago, the most important thing for a Real Princess to do was to be true to her values and beliefs.

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As they walked into the entrance of Liberty Hall, there were already a lot of reporters waiting outside. Team Angelle had become much more important than in previous elections. This was getting real.

"How do you feel about your chances tonight?" one reporter asked.

"I'm feeling confident. I'm cautiously optimistic," Angelle replied, trying her best to look happy.

As Angelle entered the main hall, she could see that it was already well decorated in yellow and purple. The refreshment bar was also ready, with plenty of food for everyone.

"It's already been set up?" Angelle asked, quite surprised.

"Of course, we're big players now, so things like these are automatically done for us. Besides, this is Liberty Hall, not some shabby venue in the suburbs. We tell them how to do it, and they do it," Katie said.

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Angelle felt slightly more relieved as the results came in. The Princess's Spirit Party had won 40 seats, which would theoretically be more than enough to make her Royalty. But nowadays,

with the 'inflation' in the number of nominations actually needed due to intense competition, this number would be borderline. Still, there are likely to be independents and minor parties she could negotiate with. She believes she is still likely to get what she wants in the end.

"So we're the second largest party in there now," Natalie said, quite pleased.

"I can't believe they are stupid enough to have trusted the CTE, to give them the most seats," Jordan said.

"Well, some people just hear 'progressive' and sign up, and don't really study the policies and their implications, unfortunately. In another four years' time, hopefully they will have learnt their lesson, seeing how CTE actually operates in the Council," Katie said.

"But still, I have to say we've done well. And no, we'll never sacrifice our principles to compete with CTE, or even worse, cut deals with enemies of liberty like CTE. We didn't do it in 2006 and we won't begin to do that now," Natalie said.

"You're right. Their version of 'progress', which is to implement it over the liberties, the wishes, and even the actual livelihoods of people, is incompatible with our much more inclusive and pro-liberty vision of progress. And since we know we're right and they're wrong, why would we give in to them?" Katie said.

"So it's time to celebrate, right?" Jordan said.

"I don't know. I'm worried about how divided the whole place is now, with extremists of all types gaining a foothold in there. Besides, being second to CTE would be a weird position to play in," Angelle said.

"So you're worried?" Mandel asked, almost surprised.

"Don't worry, CTE has no mainstream appeal, and it's not like they have an absolute majority or can work with anyone else in there, so they are still as fringe as ever before despite their 50 seats. As for the division and rise of extremists, that's the case everywhere around the world in the 2010s, unfortunately," Jordan said.

"I actually think this situation will suit us well. Our talent, or should I say your talent, is to bring people together, and that should be our new theme. It will be an exciting and fruitful four years, with lots to be done," Natalie said.

"Meanwhile, I believe the big story in this election is the collapse of the GHP. Only 12 seats! Jenelle will certainly resign as leader now," Katie said.

This thought made Angelle more optimistic. Not because she hated the GHP or Jenelle. Frankly, she has bigger things to worry about nowadays. But the splintering of the GHP vote has meant that there are now many more minor parties and independents, that she can potentially court. In a reflection of the international picture, the conservatives are now fundamentally divided by things like marriage equality, paying the price for their long-standing authoritarian tendencies some would say, and they surely can't come together again as a functioning bloc any time soon. This, in turn, means that some moderate conservatives may come into the broader liberal tent, and maybe even become new allies.

Thinking about it, Angelle was confident that her strategy to bring people together would work well in an environment like this. She decided that this should be her 'theme' for now

on. Tonight's speech to the media will set the tone of things to come.

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"Ladies and Gentlemen,

Thank you for being here with the Princess's Spirit Party tonight, as we celebrate our gains in this election. I would firstly like to thank my team, who have been working day and night to make this possible. I also thank you for your loyalty to me, personally. I also wish to thank my family, especially my mom, without whose support I wouldn't be here today.

We are well aware that our supporters come from all walks of life, including struggling young people, everyday families who just want to get

on with their lives, the increasing number of people who are sick and tired of the 'culture wars', and entrepreneurs and others with new ideas who want a chance to make their vision come true, just to name a few groups. Some people have questioned how a party supported by such a diverse range of people can work effectively for all of them. For us, it all boils down to two things: our vision of one society that works for everyone, and our belief in liberty.

Like a Real Princess, we strive to work for the welfare of a wide range of people. We simply don't leave people behind because we somehow judge that we don't like them. We also believe that people are entitled to be different, and society should be inclusive of all. Furthermore, we believe that there can be unity in diversity, and peace in difference, through a common commitment to liberty. A vision of liberty and equal opportunity will

benefit everyone in society, whether you are a struggling single mother or an entrepreneur, whether you are a social visionary or just someone who wants society to leave your family alone. It is the core of our vision.

We are grateful that a record number of voters have decided to support us. To those who have come aboard our ship in this election, we promise that we won't let you down.

Going forward, I have proposed and my team has agreed that the name of this party will be changed to Unity in Liberty, to reflect our new core mission. The Princess's Spirit is, after all, about bringing people together and working for a better deal in life for everyone. It is about coming together to ensure the best chance for all of us to achieve each of our dreams. It also is about ending the bigotry and discriminatory limitations in society, while making sure no new

taboos are established and no new outcasts are created in the process. A vision of unity in the pursuit of practical, effective liberty is the best way to achieve all of the aforementioned outcomes. Therefore, it is the truest political manifestation of the Princess's Spirit.

Thank you."

Chapter 35

Negotiations

"So you're OK with this plan?" Angelle asked.

"Yes, of course. We're all in this together," Natalie said.

"You have always been my top advisor. I really need your help now. Will our team accept the plan, or will they think I'm acting out of my self interest? I can't afford any suspicion or division in our ranks right now, with CTE ready to exploit any sign of those things any minute," Angelle said.

"Honestly, I can't be 100% sure, but I think it'll work. I mean, in this complex game we all need to use strategy, and even if there are critics in the short term, in the longer term we will be vindicated, and that will win us respect on a totally different level. We can only prove CTE wrong once and for all that way," Natalie said.

"And honestly, do you think my asking for that something in return will make it look bad?" Angelle asked.

"Not really. Not asking anything in return will look much more suspicious in fact, to both the GHP and our own supporters. On the GHP side, they may start suspecting Jenelle of selling out, threatening her already weak leadership, undermining the whole deal. In our camp, the fact that we get something too makes everyone more comfortable with the deal. And that something is not small, remember. I'm sure everyone will understand that the status and clout of the first-elected Cultural Royal will advance our cause a long way, and will be made all the more powerful combined with our control over Jenelle," Natalie said.

This eased Angelle's mind a bit. Logically, this was both the best deal for herself and the best deal for her party and cause. Letting Jenelle be

the new Chairwoman but using Team Angelle's votes to control her from behind would be a much better strategy than going for the Council Chair herself and risking being the common enemy in this fractured Council. Asking something in return only makes the deal less suspicious. But the fact that all this would also be the route to provide Angelle with her lifelong ambition, the status of Cultural Royalty, still made her fear any accusations of putting self interest before the common good.

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Nobody could know they were here, so it had to be quick. Of course, nobody was likely to know, since this was the dorm room of a mutually trusted friend, on the quiet top floor, no less. But still, they knew they had to be careful.

"So all my people will nominate you to be Cultural Royalty by the deadline at lunchtime today, and you'll receive your email notice early this afternoon. In return, this evening your people will vote as a bloc for me to be the new Chair," Jenelle said.

"It's also all the other minor parties and independents that we've been able to include in our deal too, so it's not just my people and your people technically. But yes, that's the deal we discussed last week. You have my word for it," Angelle said.

"Your word? How can I trust that? How can I know you won't just vote yourself into the Chair instead once you've secure the nominations, so you'll have both things?" Jenelle said.

"You know, in politics, reputation is everything. For a Cultural Royal, reputation is even more important. If I break my promise, you can simply go out and tell the media about it, and it

will sink my career for good. Why would I do that?" Angelle said.

Jenelle thought for a while.

"You know, maybe we should put the past behind us. Honestly, I don't hate you anymore. You are a worthy adversary, but that doesn't mean we can't form alliances sometimes too. In politics, there are no permanent friends or enemies, after all," she said.

"You know, I've never actually hated you. I'm glad you're now mature enough to understand that politics is about much more important things than personal likes or dislikes," Angelle said.

"I guess we're not teenagers anymore," Jenelle said.

"Agreed. But for the sake of getting this thing done smoothly, I need you and your people to keep up the usual show running for the rest of today at least," Angelle said.

"We'll keep the show running, of course. And it won't just be for today. I sense that we have to pretend to be arch enemies for a little longer, just to keep self interests or extremism from being too excited and spoil everything," Jenelle said.

"Agreed," Angelle said.

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Angelle and her team of 40 walked triumphantly to the pick-up point after classes. In her hand was the new banner for the party, still purple and yellow, but bearing their new name, 'Unity in Liberty'. The notice of receiving 84 nominations for Cultural Royalty that she had received just two hours ago sure did help her confidence, even though it was something she had expected anyway.

"Here comes the late MHC again. It looks like they have ditched the stupid Princess brand, but guess what, your new name sucks just as much!" Jenelle shouted, perhaps a bit too deliberately loudly, as Team Angelle approached.

"Be careful. If I were you, I would try to get along with the incoming Chairwoman. We've got at least 60 votes locked in so Angelle will definitely win this time," Natalie yelled back.

"Who knows? Maybe someone else out there has more," Jenelle said.

"It looks like all the conservative forces are still with Jenelle, and Jenelle still hates Angelle. I think we can win," Angelle overheard a CTE member whispered to another.

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The ride to Heirs Council surely looks very familiar to Angelle now. The ride does feel a little different today though, and not just because she was on a big bus of more than 40 seats. Something important, and quite exciting, was about to happen, and you could feel the tension in the air.

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Angelle led her team off the bus, to be greeted by a smartly dressed young man.

"I guess you're going to lead us to our new seats? By the way, I'm Angelle, leader of Unity in Liberty, and this is Natalie, my deputy, and the rest of the team," Angelle said.

"And a team of 40 too, I'm so honoured to be your host tonight! By the way, my name is Mack," he said.

"So Mack, where has the King assigned us to sit this year?" Natalie asked, as they walked.

"He's just changed it to alphabetical order this time," Mack said.

Angelle was relieved to hear. One less thing to care about.

"By the way, Angelle's running for Chairwoman, right?" Mack asked.

"I don't know, we haven't discussed it. I guess it's her choice," Natalie said.

"You're running, right, Angelle?" Mack asked Angelle.

"I'm sorry, I'm not supposed to discuss this matter in this context. You know, I'll be disqualified if I did," Angelle said.

"So you're running," Mack said.

"I never said that," Angelle said.

Chapter 36
The Maiden Speech

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen. Welcome back to Heirs Council! My name is Jack, I'm the chief secretary of the Heirs Council Clerks, but I'm not your new Chairman, don't worry. As you know, as former Chairman Peter Waters lost his seat in last year's elections, we don't have a Chair right now, so our first order of business is to elect a Chair. The inauguration of new Royals will take place afterwards, because a Chair's discretion is required for that task, even though I need to remind everybody that the discretion is ceremonial only and the five people with the most nominations will as a rule be crowned," Jack announced.

"Tonight, we have two candidates for Chairperson, Jenelle Lacey representing the Grand Heritage Party, and Nadia Leah

representing Change The Era. Without delay, I invite Miss Lacey to take the stage to make her case for election."

There was gasps around the room, followed by loud chatter. They were surprised that Angelle was not running. Previously, everyone had thought it would be between Angelle and Nadia. This expectation also meant nobody else thought they had a chance, so nobody else nominated. Everything was going to plan, Angelle thought.

Angelle turned to address her team.

"So, as leader, who do you advise we vote for?" Natalie asked, already knowing the answer.

"Why didn't you run yourself?" Katie asked, also knowing the answer, but doing it for the benefit of the newer team members who don't know the arrangement.

"As you can see, this is a fractured and divided Council, and it's risky to put yourself out there, as you can become the common enemy. It would be much better to have one of these two clowns take the poisoned chalice. As for which clown should have it, I vote Jenelle. Because right now, CTE is our main enemy, and we don't want to give them any edge in any sense. Besides, it will set up Jenelle and the GHP as CTE's main enemies for this term, meaning they have less time to attack us," Angelle said. "Any other opinions?"

The team agreed in unison.

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"The results are in," Jack announced, after reappearing on stage. "There were a lot of blank ballots, but as per the rules, the

candidate with the most valid ballots win. Candidate Leah, 39%, Candidate Lacey, 61%. I hereby announce that Jenelle Lacey is the new Chairwoman of Heirs Council. And with that, my duty today is done. I should hand over to your new Chairwoman,"

There were both cheers and boos, but mostly boos. Angelle instructed her team to join in the booing, as part of the 'show'.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, I am honoured to be your new Chairwoman," Jenelle said, as the booing continued.

"My first order of business is to inaugurate new Cultural Royals, the Class of 2013. As per usual practice, I have used my ceremonial discretion to select five new Cultural Royals from the many nominations. Your new Royals are, in

order of selection, Princess Angelle of House Easterner, Prince Luke of House Blueboard, Princess Rosie of House London, Prince Martin of House Roy, and Princess Lisa of House Lee. I welcome them on stage for the crowning."

As Angelle walked towards the stage, she almost cried. She had worked so hard for this, for the past ten years. But she knew that this was just the beginning. A Cultural Princess has to act like a real Princess and serve the community accordingly. Angelle knew that her real work had only just begun.

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"As per our tradition, the new Cultural Royals will each give a Maiden Speech as part of their induction, to let them tell the world what they intend to use their new status for. The

speeches are to be scheduled over the next few meetings, to be held where time permits, and in order of selection. As we still have plenty of time remaining today, I think we should begin the speeches. So let me invite Princess Angelle to the stage again!" Jenelle announced.

Angelle walked up the stage again, and shook Jenelle's hand before taking the microphone. They smiled briefly at each other, in a 'mission accomplished' kind of way.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

I am honoured to be selected as a Cultural Princess. You can have trust in me that I will use my position to serve our community.

I am a big fan of the idea of unity in liberty. In fact, this is the new name of our party, as approved by the whole team, as it is the clearest statement of our mission. I will work for a society where we bring people together to solve our collective problems, and uphold the liberty of each individual to pursue their vision otherwise. In fact, I also believe that as a society we should provide adequate opportunities for everyone to become their best in life, this is one important aspect of liberty that is often forgotten. Through all this, we can achieve unity in liberty.

We need unity because, to achieve progress, it is vital that we bring people together. Right now, in both the UK and New Zealand, conservatives, moderates and progressives alike are working to progress the issue of marriage equality, which looks set to be achieved later this year in both countries. On the other hand, a picture of divisiveness, a state

of culture war between so-called progressives and so-called conservatives, have hampered moves towards the same reform in countries like the US and Australia. It's clear which model Pacificland should follow. As responsible adults, we should recognise that we are not kids anymore, and to serve the best interests of our society and indeed our world, we need to stop the bickering and pointless rivalry and come together in rational discussion. When you've experienced enough of this world and its political shifts, you realise that there are in fact very few people in this world that you can never work with, that you can be sure will never be helpful to you one day.

We also need liberty because we are all equal, in a moral sense. We are all morally imperfect, and we can all make important moral contributions on the other hand. To limit the moral agency of another human being is potentially to force another into immoral

behaviour, and therefore something we should refrain from. I believe that in a free market of ideas, the best will ultimately win out. Moreover, the only sustainable unity that we can have is in liberty. If we allow some people's beliefs to override others', there will never be peace for long. On the other hand, in a system that we agree to sometimes disagree and let everyone have space to follow their own moral compasses, we can nevertheless unite to both solve our collective issues, and also to protect liberty itself.

In today's rapidly changing world, there is often too much cultural and ideological tribalism, where people of a certain group just blindly follow their group, and fight against other groups in cultural and identity type battles. This phenomenon is most clearly seen in identity politics, but is not even limited to that area. With unity in liberty, I offer something different: where a strong culture of liberty for

all means an end to such tribalism, and in turn allow us to come together as one society defending liberty and equal opportunity strongly, negating the need for identity politics.

Once again, I am humbled by the huge responsibility now placed upon me, and I will work hard to bring my values to fruition, making Pacificland and the world a better place in the process."

There were both cheers and booing, and Angelle could make out that the loudest boos have come from the CTE area. No surprises there, she thought.

Chapter 37

Angelle's First Endorsement

"I wish to announce that I will soon publicly endorse the Ramstown bid for the throne, by the way," Angelle told her team.

"But do we really need to take sides? And should we actually do so, strategically?" Mandel asked.

"First of all, it's me who is taking sides, not all of you. Unity in Liberty remains neutral in this year's election, but I myself, as a Cultural Princess, have decided to give my endorsement to Senator Ramstown's bid to become our new King," Angelle explained.

"But why would you have to take sides, anyway? Isn't it risky?" Jordan asked.

"Every decision in politics comes with certain risks, and trying to stay away from risk all the time won't work either. As a new Cultural

Princess, being the first Cultural Royal to give an endorsement in a national election will certainly help my profile. It will also be a good chance to highlight the many things that I agree with Ramstown on, like the need to provide our youth with better educational opportunities, the need to increase welfare payments to liveable levels, and the need to legislate for marriage equality as a priority," Angelle said.

"But would you be forced to then agree with him on everything else?" Jordan asked.

"I don't think so. An endorsement basically just means he is better than the other guy and can be given on a number of limited grounds, it doesn't have to mean total agreement. Past Cultural Royalty endorsements have often left space for substantial disagreements in policy," Angelle said.

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As Angelle walked into the Pacificland Press Club Building to make her speech, reporters were already waiting outside with their cameras and microphones. Angelle suddenly realised how much more important she had now become. In fact, all this attention was beginning to make her feel uneasy.

"Are you giving your endorsement to a candidate today?" one reporter asked.

"Well, you'll find out soon," Angelle said.

"Is it true that you hate King Jashor?" another reporter asked.

"I don't hate anybody. But I've really got to go now, as I'm already running late," Angelle said, as she made a dash to the right to break free from the reporters.

As soon as she got inside, Angelle was received by a staff member, who took her up to level five, where press conferences are usually held.

"Are you nervous?" he asked.

"Maybe a bit," Angelle said.

"You know it's normal to feel a bit nervous. It's your first press conference, after all," he said.

It almost felt surreal, as Angelle stepped into the press conference area. She had seen this place on television so many times throughout her life, and now she was there. The royal blue curtain, the wooden stage, the rows of chairs where the reporters sat, everything looked so familiar. Yet it all looked a bit different, now that she was seeing the whole place in real life, from a different perspective than the one shown on TV. The whole room was definitely smaller than she had always imagined it to be.

Angelle took her place at the center of the stage.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

Today I am announcing my endorsement of Senator John Ramstown in his bid to run for election as our new King.

In three months' time our nation will make a very important decision. To stick with King Jashor, or to elect a new King, and if we are to elect a new King, who to get behind.

Firstly, I must say that I have no ill feelings towards King Jashor. However, I do not agree with many of his policies. Opinion polls have also shown that his policies, which have stayed mostly the same since the beginning of his reign

a decade ago, have lost majority support in recent years. In the past decade, much of the world including many Pacificlanders have become much more forward looking, regarding a wide range of issues, including the need to provide better opportunities for our young and our disadvantaged, the need to invest in computer and internet related infrastructure to meet new demands, and the need to seriously address the rights of long suffering minorities, such as in marriage equality. The King is a conservative man, and he apparently does not want to change his mind. I believe his refusal to let Pacificland evolve, even in the face of rapidly changing global situations and attitudes, means that Pacificland will become a backwater where its citizens no longer enjoy the freedom and opportunities people can soon take for granted in other developed nations. It is for this reason, and this reason alone, that I believe we need a change in leadership.

As to which candidate we should get behind, I think we should all get behind the candidate who will address the aforementioned issues and who has the best chance of winning the race. While many candidates are serious about progressing a variety of issues, it looks like this year it will mainly come down to a two-horse race between King Jashor and Senator Ramstown. It is therefore my belief that the best path forward to get the progress many of us want will be to get behind Senator Ramstown together.

I have time for two questions."

There was a brief pause.

"Princess Angelle, I know you have been a long term supporter of gay marriage. Is your decision to endorse the defeat of King Jashor to

do with this issue mostly? And if so, don't you think you're paying too much attention to a side dish?" a reporter asked.

"I never endorse anybody based on one policy alone. My endorsement is for the overall benefit of our nation and its future. However, I also don't agree with the characterisation of marriage equality as a side dish, and many people of my generation both in this country and overseas would agree with me. Equal civil rights before the law is something we should uphold keenly, and the attitude of seeing it as a side dish is frankly offensive. Unfortunately, you are definitely not alone in thinking this way. Plenty of commentators both here and overseas have described marriage equality as nothing more than a distraction from so-called more important issues, and it's time those of us who disagree spoke up," Angelle said.

"So you're telling people to get behind Senator Ramstown, just because he's the front-runner at the moment? Shouldn't it be a fair race, let the best guy win?" another reporter asked.

"I am doing what I think is best for the nation, others can agree with me or decide otherwise. But here's my plea to all of you: everybody out there who wants change, please come together and find a way forward together, and don't let our energy splinter in a dozen different directions," Angelle said.

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It has been just two days since Angelle's endorsement of Ramstown, but right now there's trouble for both of them. A viral video, likely made by people associated with CTE, is spreading on the internet. It alleges that

Angelle only became a Cultural Princess because she agreed to be a lap dog of Jenelle's, and by extension, because Angelle endorses Ramstown and Jenelle endorses Jashor, they are effectively one and the same.

"I have to right this wrong, if only to be fair to Ramstown, whatever the price to myself," Angelle declared.

"But what exactly are you going to do? There are so many things you can do to make it worse for both of you," Natalie said.

Angelle thought for a while.

"You do have a point. So what do you think I should do?" Angelle asked.

"I guess we can start safely, by publicly demanding a chance to clarify this matter with CTE," Natalie said.

Chapter 38

Two People, Three Questions

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to another episode of Two People, Three Questions, where we invite two polar opposites and let our audience come up with three questions for them to answer.

Tonight is a special episode. Heirs Council based political party Change The Era has been associated with recent accusations that newly elected Cultural Princess Angelle Easterner got her position after doing a deal with her traditional enemy, the newly elected Heirs Council Chairwoman Jenelle Lacey. Princess Angelle has since been demanding a chance to publicly clarify the matter with those accusing her, and we've decided to get her what she wants. So tonight we have Princess Angelle of

House Easterner, together with Change The Era leader Nadia Leah.

Let's go to the first question."

"You both say that you are interested in progress for our society, and now you are at each other's throats, even as Jashor is regaining ground in the polls. Why should we trust either of you?" an audience member stood up and asked.

"Thank you for your question. As you mentioned, Jashor is in front in the polls again, and it's thanks to people like Change The Era, who are smearing his only serious opposition. I don't know why they are doing this, but Change The Era is effectively acting as a friend of Jashor, which is why they shouldn't be trusted. As for Senator Ramstown and myself, we only

want what's best for our future, which is also what the people of Pacificland want for our future. Think about this: a Ramstown administration will see us moving in the right direction straight away, but Change The Era wants to prevent this from happening," Angelle said.

"Well, you can always trust Change The Era, as we always stand up for justice. Unlike Princess Angelle, who has sold out her values to become a Princess. And we've just proven to you that Jashor and Ramstown are not that different, so Jashor regaining in the polls is not the most important thing. The most important thing is to get behind the people really fighting for progress, and that's us, and to avoid the trap of business as usual masquerading as progress, and that's Angelle and Ramstown," Nadia said.

"Unlimited funding for university places, marriage equality within three months, and doubling pensions, and you call that business as usual?" Angelle asked.

"There are still plenty of things that are not good enough..." Nadia said.

"Well, let's get back on track. Let's go to the second question," the host said.

"This whole fight seems to be about Princess Angelle's endorsement of Candidate Ramstown. So let's focus a bit there. Why do you think Ramstown being King is a good idea, Princess, and why do you think it's not a good idea, Miss Leah?" another audience member asked.

"As I've said many times before, a Ramstown administration will move us forward in the right direction immediately. Even if things don't change overnight, we will be making plenty of progress. Unlimited funding for university places, marriage equality within three months, and doubling pensions, these are all just the beginning. There will also be a program to upgrade our computer and internet infrastructure, a review to identify new national parks that should be declared, and more. It really is an opportunity that's too good to miss," Angelle said.

"Change The Era has decided that we will endorse Candidate Sumon, because he stands for making society the wonderful place it should be. A Sumon administration will make university free, legislate that everyone must accept marriage equality rather than just the government allowing it, and they will also double the pensions and build new

infrastructure, so in every way he either equals or exceeds Ramstown's offers. And then, unlike Ramstown, Sumon will also take in a hundred thousand refugees per year, sue companies that don't have enough female directors, remove culturally appropriating art from our museums, set a code of acceptable speech for parliament and universities to protect our minorities from hate speech, and so on. Things that people like Ramstown are too scared to do, because they offend the status quo. But offend the status quo we must, if we are to have a wonderful and just society," Nadia said.

"But don't you notice that Candidate Sumon isn't doing too well in the polls? He cannot bring people together to create a mandate for change, instead he alienates people left, right and center. I appreciate his idealism, but his authoritarian policies are causing people to run scared. His campaign is dividing the country more than anything," Angelle said.

"That's because people with vested self interests and bigots don't want change generally. It's not his fault," Nadia said.

"Change is a process of compromise, and I agree that vested interests are a sad thing. I'm sure Candidate Ramstown feels the same way, as he tries to get the best deal for all of us. But as it stands, every vote for Candidate Sumon is a vote wasted, that could have otherwise caused change if it went to Candidate Ramstown. So isn't this helping Jashor, more than anything?" Angelle asked.

"The ends, to depose of Jashor in this case, do not justify the means. Jashor will get deposed of sooner or later, but it's not right to endorse someone like Ramstown, who won't make

society wonderful enough. We cannot legitimise a lesser evil," Nadia said.

"That sounds like my way or the highway. As a responsible Princess who wants the best for her people, I cannot help but think about how many will miss out on much needed progress, because of your attitude," Angelle said.

"Well, we're running out of time. Let's go to our final question," the host said.

"My question goes back to the very reason we're here tonight. Princess, did you do a deal with Chairwoman Lacey, and if so, why do you think it's justified? On the other hand, Miss Leah, what evidence exactly do you have that there is a deal between Angelle and Jenelle, and what exactly do you know about it?"

"I do everything after careful consideration, for the best outcomes. In the case of Heirs Council, yes I did vote for Jenelle, and also directed my party members to do so. This is because, out of the two candidates, I thought she would make the less worse Chair. I did discuss with Jenelle beforehand of my decision, as I generally do in similar circumstances, so make whatever you want to out of this. But the fact is, I cannot allow someone like Nadia Leah, who thinks that people should wait for so-called real justice to come while suffering injustice without end, to use the Chair of the Heirs Council to legitimise their stance. That was the basis of my decision," Angelle said.

"What we know is that Angelle would have the numbers to win if she ran, but she chose to support Jenelle instead. That is evidence enough of a deal for me, and for many people.

The real mystery is why you did not run, and you aren't addressing that," Nadia said.

"I didn't run because it wouldn't have been in the best interests of my party," Angelle said.

"Look me in the eyes, and tell me, did you do a deal or not?" Nadia asked.

"Well, I of course bargained for the best position for my party as a condition of support, as is a leader's duty. You may call it a deal if you wish. I am also not at liberty to reveal the terms of any bargain. But the fact that I continue to support what I've always supported shows that I haven't become a lap dog of anybody. In fact, I can tell you that in 2006 CTE wanted to make a deal with us, and we refused. But it wouldn't have made CTE a lap dog of ours if we agreed, right? We all make our offers to work together,

and that doesn't mean anyone has to sell out their values.

"But let me put it this way. If I struck a deal with you instead, you wouldn't be complaining, right? I could have struck a deal with you instead, and I didn't. Why? Because I always do what I think would be best for our future. And that was keeping you out of the Chair. Because I couldn't run myself, Jenelle was the lesser evil," Angelle said.

Chapter 39

A Conversation

"You may think this is the way to real progress, but it's really a trap. Yes. Rather than providing a path to real progress, going for Candidate Ramstown this election will doom our momentum towards real progress, in exchange for some consolation prizes.

In fact, the point of Ramstown's candidacy is to keep real progressive ideas out of government. No, this is not a conspiracy theory. In fact, one of Ramstown's biggest supporters, Princess Angelle, has openly stated that this is her intention.

'In fact, I can tell you that in 2006 CTE wanted to make a deal with us, and we refused.'

'I could have struck a deal with you instead, and I didn't. Why? Because I always do what I think would be best for our future. And that was keeping you out of the Chair. Because I couldn't run myself, Jenelle was the lesser evil.'

Don't fall for this trap. Support real progressives this election. And if Jashor wins again, at least we've sent the likes of Ramstown a strong message, that it's real progress or bust.

Make no mistake. We don't want the crumbs from your table. We'd rather wait for what we deserve."

Angelle was so angry that she turned off the TV instantly. She was still surprised that this advertisement had been allowed to run for a

week now. Didn't the electoral laws prohibit blatant slander like this?

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The pouring rain really didn't help. Angelle was already both tired and feeling bad. Tired because she had travelled all the way across town after classes, just to make this apology, and feeling bad because she felt that it was mostly her fault that Ramstown was going to lose tomorrow.

As Angelle entered the front of Ramstown's electoral office, her heart felt heavy. What was he going to say, she wondered. Was he going to be angry? If so, he did have a right to be. These thoughts kept swirling in her mind, as she waited for her appointment.

"The senator is ready to see you," the receptionist finally said, after what seemed like an eternity.

The receptionist led Angelle through the office, and into a room at the back of the office, where Ramstown was waiting.

Angelle sat down, facing Ramstown, as the receptionist closed the door and left them alone.

"Good evening, Princess, I am Senator Ramstown. I am of the impression that there is something you want to talk to me about?" he said.

"I just came here to say sorry. I am very sorry for wrecking your campaign, for destroying

your chances. Next time you run, I will keep my mouth shut, I promise," Angelle said.

Ramstown thought for a while, but did not appear upset at all.

"First of all, there isn't going to be a next time. Once a candidate loses, he should let someone else, someone fresh have a go, for the sake of the common good. It shouldn't be about any one of us personally, anyway. We are all servants of the greater good. Second of all, please don't think it's your fault. Something like this was always likely to happen. I took a chance that it wouldn't, but it was always more likely that it would," Ramstown said.

"What do you mean?" Angelle asked.

"You know, the people behind Change The Era were hellbent on getting Jashor his landslide victory, using whatever means. If you didn't

come into the story, they would just have used another reason. In fact, many of those who are personally more keen on being King than myself have decided to stay out of the game for now and wait until CTE burns out. I've only decided to run because, well, tough as the situation is, we've got to try something," he said.

"So, so you're not angry at me?" she asked.

"Of course not. In fact, I'm sure nothing you did changed the outcome. The relevant unknown was always whether the people behind CTE are well organised enough and persuasive enough, to get enough people to be willing to put off change," he said.

"I don't understand," she said.

"I see, I see. You don't really know what we're up against at all. Let me tell you then. Now, promise me you won't tell anyone that this came from me," he said.

"I promise," she said.

"You see, CTE aren't really who they say they are, and don't really want what they say they want. The people behind CTE, I know them well actually. I have known them since my Royal College days," he said.

"But that's impossible. Nadia Leah and the rest of the leadership are all around my age," she said.

"You see, Ms Leah and the rest are nothing but puppets, but even they aren't supposed to know it. CTE is, in fact, run by a bunch of old people my age. They have always had this agenda of revolution. They believe in a revolutionary change, resulting in an authoritarian government that will implement their utopian agenda. They also believe that any smaller progress is not worth it, and can only be a distraction to their grand plan. So they will raise the expectations of young people, while they keep conservative governments like Jashor's running. They believe the resulting frustration will mean that a critical

mass of people in society will one day accept their revolutionary proposal, and vote them into power accordingly," he said.

Angelle took some time to absorb it all. She couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"But CTE only exists as a party in the Heirs Council," she said.

"Yes, that's true, for the time being. They are building their base among young people, for now," he said.

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

"The authoritarian radicals believe that young people is where they will make the most inroads, for several reasons. Firstly, both here and internationally, the young people today are the most progressive cohort since the 1970s, and they are very frustrated about the past

three or four decades of relative conservatism. This makes them receptive to radical ideas. Secondly, young people generally haven't seen first hand how social change is made, step-by-step, and don't know the value of gradual progress and compromise. They are less likely to have faith in the ability of rational discussion and persuasion to change social attitudes. Therefore, they are more able to be persuaded against the effectiveness of the liberal enlightenment values of freedom, rational debate and gradual but effective progress as a result," he said.

"But you said that the authoritarian radicals are old people. They surely would know the value of freedom, rational debate and gradual progress?" Angelle asked.

"I guess it's something they've believed in since they were young and naive, and they just can't let go of it emotionally. Or maybe they haven't opened their eyes enough to see the changes in the past several decades and how they have

come about. I guess some people never evolve from the ideals of their youth, even if evidence says they were misguided," he said.

Angelle paused again, to process it all.

"There's something else I want to ask you. Since CTE is already using me to destroy other people's election campaigns, am I already being a burden on the common good?" she asked.

"Well, that's a question only you can answer yourself. I don't know Heirs Council politics that well, really. But as a general principle, strategically you should put the least controversial people on the front line, so to say, to minimise any weakness you may have," he said.

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"Who told you all that?" Natalie asked.

"I can't give you any names. I swore to keep it secret. But it was an authoritative source," Angelle said.

"So what are we going to do now?" Natalie asked.

"I am going to resign from the party leadership and from Heirs Council, even though I will still be available for advice. You will lead the party and continue to bring people together the way I did. You should also use our new knowledge of the CTE in your leadership, but don't share it with too many people for now," Angelle said.

"You can't resign. We need you," Natalie said.

"As a general principle, strategically we should put the least controversial people on the front line, to minimise any weakness we may have, especially in these important times. You were

always the brains behind the party, you can do it," Angelle said.

"I'll do my best, I promise," Natalie said.

"And one more thing," Angelle said.

"What?" Natalie asked.

"You should challenge Jenelle for the Chair at the next meeting. Whether you get it or not, at least this will help put CTE's accusations behind us," Angelle said.

Chapter 40

Graduation Day

They say that graduation day, especially at Royal College, should be a proud occasion for everyone. But right now, for Angelle, this day is anything but proud. She was still feeling guilty about the recent national elections, for one. Despite what Ramstown had told her, she couldn't help but think of what might have been, if not for her 'role'. When Jashor delivered the opening speech at the graduation ceremony, she couldn't help but feel guilty. Jashor may no longer be King, if not for her, after all. Now that the ceremony is over, she really couldn't wait to leave.

"Hey Angelle," Jenelle said, coming towards her.

The sight of Jenelle made Angelle feel even worse. Should she have told Natalie to challenge for the Chair of the Council? Was that really the right thing to do? Couldn't she have just kept her promise this once? She had tried to avoid thinking of how bad Jenelle must have been feeling, having to sit and listen to Natalie deliver the Heirs Council speech at the ceremony, when she had expected all year that this would be her moment. But there was no avoiding it now.

"I'm sorry," Angelle said, not knowing what else to say.

"What are you sorry for?" Jenelle asked.

"I'm not going to hide it. I suggested to Natalie that she challenge for the Chair, to put all the rumours behind us," Angelle said.

"You really think I would feel bad for not giving that speech? Let Natalie have it, this may be

her biggest moment of all time. But for me, I will have many bigger and better opportunities. I really couldn't care less," Jenelle said.

"Really? You're not angry at me?" Angelle said.

"To say the truth, I was a bit upset when you caused me to lose the GHP leadership, as a result of losing the Chair. But then I realised that the GHP were all just self-important Jashor lackeys, and I didn't want to be a part of that anyway. I've been so much happier ever since becoming an independent. In a way, you gave me the best gift ever," Jenelle said.

"And you're not just saying this to make me feel better?" Angelle said.

"Why would I? I've never wanted to make you feel good, right?" Jenelle said.

"But today's graduation day," Angelle said.

"I don't make any such exceptions from my policy of always telling the truth," Jenelle said.

Angelle went back inside to join Natalie and her group. She felt that she had to at least say goodbye to them properly.

"Hi Natalie," Angelle said.

"Hey Angelle," Natalie said. "Haven't talked to you all day. Where have you been?"

"I've been around," Angelle said.

"You look sad. Is anything wrong?" Katie asked.

"I'm sorry to have ruined everything for everybody," Angelle said.

"Why?" Jenny asked.

"I'm sorry for my role in keeping Jashor as King, for one, and for making things so awkward for all of you, for two," Angelle said.

"Well, firstly, CTE decided to do their best to help Jashor, and that was none of your fault. I

guess we'll need to defeat the Jashor-CTE alliance in three years' time, and we'll definitely need your help again. Secondly, nothing's awkward for anyone here," Jordan said.

"No, I mean Heirs Council and the whole situation there," Angelle said.

"Heirs Council? I'll have to say that you're the best thing that's ever happened to that stuffy, old place ever. We're all in there only because of you, and now they are saying that Natalie is the most respected Chairperson in decades, because she's willing to stand for something, against the old vested interests. All of this wouldn't have happened if not for you," Katie said.

"You really need to be prouder of yourself. Look at all of us. You were the key ingredient that brought us together. As for Jashor, a Princess never gives up, right? What's three more years in the whole scheme of history?" Natalie said.

Somehow, not even this was able to cheer Angelle up.

Chapter 41

Because of Jashor

Angelle was sitting alone in a cafeteria, somewhere in the city. Besides writing her novel, which she was doing now on her computer, she doesn't have much to look forward to these days. Life without College and without Heirs Council seems very empty indeed, and her entry level job really doesn't interest her much. The dire social and political situation in this country is making her angry and sad all the time, and she has been unable to do much about it.

"Now that Ireland and the whole of the US have marriage equality too, why don't we have it too?" someone near her asked.

"Because they don't have Jashor, and when you have Jashor, you can't have nice things?" their friend replied.

Here we go again, Angelle thought. That the pro-equality side in Ireland had to work hard in the recent referendum to win their rights, or that the US Supreme Court decision only came after lots of hard work, don't seem to matter to these people. Only that they don't have Jashor. In fact, in Pacificland in 2015, it seems that everyone can just blame Jashor for everything that goes wrong, without having to do anything to help bring about change themselves. The answer for everything that's wrong seems to just be 'because of Jashor'. Otherwise, they expect change to be delivered to them on a silver platter, when Jashor finally leaves. Which is, somewhere in the indefinite future.

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"Hi Angelle," Natalie said.

"Hi Natalie," Angelle said, having almost forgotten why she was in the cafeteria in the first place. Apparently Natalie had invited her to this appointment, and had something to say. What it was, she didn't know.

"The others are coming in about half an hour," Natalie said.

"There are others?" Angelle asked.

"Of course. The whole team is coming," Natalie said.

"So what is it that you want to tell me?" Angelle asked.

"I'll put it this way. We think you need a cause to fight for," Natalie said.

"What cause?" Angelle asked.

"Well, just a cause. You like to work to better society, you like to work for liberty, to bring people together, if my memory serves me right. You are also particularly passionate about marriage equality, a cause whose time has come but politics has frustrated in this country. And in the two years since our graduation, you haven't had a real fight in any of these areas. Isn't it time you put on your armour again?" Natalie asked.

"How can I fight, if nobody is willing to join me? All I even hear is 'because of Jashor', on every topic, everywhere I go. In fact, I literally just heard it again ten minutes ago, in relation to why we still don't have marriage equality," Angelle said.

"So why do you think this is happening?" Natalie said.

"Of course, it's because the likes of CTE are teaching people to think in this way. Not that I

can change that, they have heaps of funding and I don't," Angelle said.

"So what do you think would need to happen for things to change?" Natalie asked Angelle.

"The only route I see is to have Jashor removed, by having him defeated in next year's election," Angelle said.

"So would you say we support one candidate for that election, out of those available?" Natalie asked.

"The trouble is that, they are all uninspiring, and can't win. I would pick the one most likely to win, but that person just isn't there. I guess they are all waiting for CTE to burn out before they would run, maybe in five or nine years' time, to avoid suffering Ramstown's fate themselves," Angelle said.

"I guess you're right. But would you just give up there?" Natalie asked.

"I would hate to give up just like that, but what else can I do? It's what is making me sad and angry almost every day, in fact," Angelle said.

"Let me put it this way: if none of the candidates are suitable for your backing, why don't you run yourself?" Natalie asked.

"Me? Are you crazy?" Angelle asked.

"Of course not! Where's that Angelle that I used to know, the 14-year-old who ran for Heirs Council, when the odds were totally against her? Where's the Princess who would never give up, despite what people may say?" Natalie said.

"But you need funds to run for the top job," Angelle said.

"You know, we've been raising a fighting fund for you these past two years," Natalie said.

Angelle brightened up. "Really?"

"Of course. Make no mistake. You're our only hope now," Natalie said. "I have to say though, many people who care about our future have pitched in, including Senator Ramstown. In fact, I have a note from him, just for you. I don't understand it, but maybe you will."

Angelle took the folded note, and began reading.

"Remember our conversation in 2013? Nobody's going to put their hand up this time, so I agree you'll have to try. At the very least it will dampen both Jashor and CTE quite a lot."

At that moment, the others came into the cafeteria. Katie, Jordan, Mandel, Jenny, Angelle saw them approach, one by one.

And then, there was Jenelle.

"You know, you're our only hope now. You need to run for Queen in 2016, because otherwise Jashor will have a historical landslide," Mandel said.

"I beg you to take up this offer. We will support you, all the way, remember. It will be just like when we were in school," Katie said.

"You really need to run. There's no good alternative," Jenelle said.

"Wait. Don't you support Jashor? Why would you want me to ruin his landslide?" Angelle said.

"You know, people grow up. When I was younger my parents had me convinced that Jashor was right. But I don't think so now. He

really is an authoritarian pretending to be a libertarian, and I can't stand that," Jenelle said.

"But when I run, I will run strongly on marriage equality. Will you be okay with that?" Angelle said.

"Why wouldn't I? Everyone supports marriage equality now. Do I look like such a dinosaur to you?" Jenelle said.

"I don't know. In the past you were against it," Angelle said.

"In the distant past, like in the year 2000, I understand you were against it too. Does that mean anything?" Jenelle said.

"The people need their Princess to act, and act fast, you know," Natalie said.

Angelle thought for a while.

"Okay, I will run. But on one condition," Angelle said.

"What's that?" Natalie asked.

"When I run, I run to win, not just to prevent the worst. If you're in this with me, we'll all work to win," Angelle said.

Chapter 42

Angelle's Vision

This night had been almost one year in the making, but it still seems surreal to Angelle, now that it's finally happening. Until now, nobody, except for Angelle's core supporters, had known of her candidacy. It had to be kept secret until the last minute, to prevent Jashor and CTE pulling sly tricks, perhaps acting concertedly.

As the Pacificland Press Club building came into view, it was a familiar sight to Angelle. Just three years ago she had come here to endorse Ramstown's campaign. It all felt like just yesterday. Three years ago she was surprised by how 'important' she had become. Tonight she will again be the center of attention, but this time it will come as no surprise. Three years ago she was genuinely optimistic that

Ramstown had a good chance of ending Jashor's reign once and for all. Today, she is coming here to do what Ramstown ultimately could not, but to tell the truth she is also less optimistic than back then. Still, a real Princess has to hold her head high, give it her best shot, and not give up easily.

Angelle held her head high and smiled as she stepped out of the car, walking towards the building. Once again, the reporters and their cameras were already waiting outside.

"Princess, are you announcing that you are running for Queen of Pacificland?" one reporter asked.

"You will see," she replied.

"Are you really confident that you have a real chance against King Jashor?" another one asked.

"I'm not entertaining hypotheticals, but I am always confident," Angelle said.

Angelle could also hear a continuous chant of 'traitor Angelle' and 'we'd rather wait than have this witch' somewhere in the background. But she had learned to block that out.

Inside, the whole building looked familiar, just like it had been three years ago. This familiarity was a welcome sight to Angelle. At least it helped calm the nerves.

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"Thank you," Angelle told Jade, the woman who had just done her makeup.

"No, we should thank you," Jade said.

"Why?" Angelle asked.

"In these complicated and hopeless times, you are the one voice who can provide some sanity to save us," Jade said.

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As Angelle stepped into the press conference area, she could see many big name reporters and journalists already seated. This caused her to be a bit nervous. "Keep calm, and stay focused on the message," she told herself.

Angelle held her head high once again, and proceeded to the podium.

"Good evening ladies and gentlemen,

Today I am announcing my candidacy to run for the throne in the national elections at the end of next month.

To put it simply why I am running, it's because King Jashor has failed the country, and we are in a political depression. Basically, for many people it feels like nothing is right and there is not much hope for the future, sort of like an economic depression, even though the economy is thankfully not in as much trouble as it was a few years ago, thanks to improved conditions internationally. Normally an economic recovery would have generated hope, but this time, too many people simply know that no economic recovery can make up for the sorry state our King has left our society in.

As a relatively privileged member of society, I never used to know how so many people in this

society are struggling. It was not until the Occupy movements that many of us woke up, and found that we simply don't live up to our constitutional responsibility to deliver liberty, opportunity and the right to happiness to all citizens. Since then, many voices, including myself, have called for change, in both social and economic policy, but this has all fell on deaf ears. For the King, the only voices that matter seem to be those close to him, and his team seems to believe that any change is not needed, despite evidence to the contrary.

Many people in our society also have a passion to improve it, simply by speaking up, and letting people know that things need to be improved. I have been educated by many voices, telling me that things really do need to improve, especially regarding our approach to equal rights under the law, and anti-discrimination laws. Unfortunately, the King has also tried to marginalise these voices as much as possible,

by not inviting them to government panels, by using censorship, and even by unduly influencing what should be independent democratic bodies like the Heirs Council. Everything is stacked in favour of the views of himself and his fellow anti-change cronies, while this so-called democratic government is failing the people it should be representing.

In fact, King Jashor is failing even the very people he claims to represent, the traditionalists in society. In recent years, many traditionalists have come to the view that opening up marriage to gay couples is good for both marriage and the gay community, which, even Jashor must face it, is never going back into the closet ever. Some of his ministers have already let him know of their views to this effect, but they have fallen on deaf ears at best, and caused sackings at worst. Of course, poll after poll that show 70% of the population in support have also fallen on deaf ears. Clearly,

the King has put his own views ahead of what the people want, and what's best for society. King Jashor and his undemocratic ways on this issue is a classic example of the dangers of having an authoritarian on the throne.

Some progressives may contend that, as I am running as a progressive alternative to Jashor, I should vow to implement progressive values throughout society and force people to accept such values through government mandate. But don't worry, I will do no such thing. King Jashor has shown that it is bad for everyone ultimately to use government as a tool of authoritarian cultural enforcement. We should not replace one kind of dictatorship with another kind. We should replace authoritarianism with liberty, no qualifications added.

My vision is one where there's liberty and hope for everyone, whether you are rich or poor,

progressive or traditional. That is the only fair way. A King or Queen needs to govern for all, and the only way one can govern for all is to allow everyone their fair share of liberty and moral agency, listen to concerns from every sector of society, and make decisions that are backed up by the will of the people and the interest of society at large. Unlike King Jashor, I will govern for everyone when on the throne, and I will not force my views onto unwilling people, making them suffer.

In fact, I am going to start listening right now. Any of you who have any concerns or ideas you want me to listen to, you are welcome to send in a message to my campaign headquarters."

Chapter 43

Uncovering the Truth

"Ramstown was bad enough, but Queen Angelle? She would be the biggest setback progressives have ever had.

Don't be fooled. Angelle is nothing but a conservative trying to hold back the progressive tide, by offering the same consolation prizes Ramstown tried to offer. We said no thanks last time, and we will say no thanks again this year.

At Real Progress Or Bust, we believe that to compromise is to create injustice. Patience is a virtue, and waiting for real justice is something we are all happy to do. Don't settle for the lesser evil."

Angelle decided to switch off the TV, so she wouldn't see any more of these ads. Three weeks from polling day, and she was still substantially behind, thanks to ads like these.

Private polling obtained by Team Angelle found that they would actually be ahead if not for the CTE effort, called 'Real Progress Or Bust' this year. Basically, they have been out telling people to 'rather wait' and stay home rather than vote for Angelle, who was 'not committed to progressive values and policies', as 'evidenced by her own speech'. All very sad, but none of it a surprise. Meanwhile, Angelle was trying to stay optimistic by answering messages from the public that had come to her campaign headquarters.

Then one message gave her an inspiration:

"Dear Princess Angelle,

I just want you to know how grateful I am that you are truly sympathetic to people like me.

I am a 45-year-old gay man who has been engaged with my partner for ten years, still waiting to marry while getting old quickly. If we have to wait several more years, I really don't know if some of my loved family will live to see our wedding.

Some of the people who call themselves 'progressives' or 'social justice warriors' out there now want to go to great lengths to ensure nobody is hurt by unkind speech, or so they say. Ever since earlier this decade, they have even gone to great lengths to call out anyone who engages in this so-called 'microaggresion', and have demanded that any potentially hurtful

speech be hidden behind a 'trigger warning'. Yet many of the same people (at least those who live here in Pacificland) have said loudly and clearly that it is better to wait four more years to let people like me get married, so that we can get so-called real progress, as if marriage equality wasn't. Some have even said that it is selfish for people like me to want to get married now, to short change the whole of society by settling for having you as Queen. All this speech is clearly unkind to someone like me, and I wonder why they don't merit a 'trigger warning'. Maybe trigger warnings only apply when it suits their agenda.

Anyway, good luck for your campaign. Stay strong.

Keep the faith,

John."

Angelle's hopelessness turned to anger upon reading this. A real Princess cannot just stand by and do nothing about this: injustice done in the name of so-called justice is the worst injustice ever.

This is it. Nobody can read this and not start to see the caring and idealistic veneer of CTE start cracking.

Angelle did not wait to write back.

"Dear John,

Your message was inspirational, and if more people heard it, the course of our future may be changed.

Can I use your message in a public advertisement?

Yours,

Angelle."

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The rest was history, they say.

The very simple question of 'wouldn't it be better to let John get married next year' had caused deep soul searching among those formally committed to the idea of Real Progress or Bust. Less than a week after Angelle released her advertisement featuring John's message, the Real Progress Or Bust movement became

divided, and suspended operations. CTE itself was in crisis, as the membership started to question the teachings and tactics of their 'senior advisors', and many members resigned. Some even joined Angelle's campaign. Angelle's polling rose quickly, and she is now neck-and-neck with Jashor.

Recent events have recovered Angelle's faith in humanity, which had sunk to an all time low just one year ago, the very day she was sitting in that cafeteria waiting for Natalie's unexpected intervention. There are still plenty of people who really care about other people out there, apparently. Of course, there is still Jashor to fight, and being the youngest candidate for the throne in a century won't be easy. There's still a long way to go, and a big fight to be had, but this is already a good place to start.

Chapter 44

A Debate With No Moderator

"Don't worry, you'll do fine," Katie said, as the driver pulled up to the Pacificland Press Club building, a very familiar sight indeed by now. Angelle could see that the whole building had been decorated in blue and green, Pacificland's national colours, in preparation for the National Debate.

"I'm sure I can win the arguments by logic, because Jashor doesn't have much logic anyway. But in politics, everything is about perception, and Jashor is the master of deception in this area," Angelle said.

"Deception can only go so far. The truth will always win, in the end," Natalie said.

As Angelle stepped out of the car, a well-dressed young woman was already waiting to

escort her to the debate. Of course, this is the National Debate, and the whole nation is watching, so everything had to be well prepared. Even now, as Angelle is walking into the building, the cameras are already filming. Showing the two contenders arrive has been a big part of the tradition ever since people had televisions. Angelle was also well aware that this could be historical. In many previous election campaigns, certain things said in the National Debate had become defining issues, often changing the course of the whole campaign.

"The King will be asking all the questions. You just have to answer. It will be like a 'friendly chat', in his own words," the young woman told Angelle.

Angelle was sort of surprised, but not really that surprised. The reigning King always had the ability to set the agenda of the debate. Most

Kings followed convention and assigned fair rules to the debate, but Jashor, the 'ultimate deceptor' as some people call him, has been known to use very unconventional, and arguably unfair, debating formats to his advantage.

"Are you fine with this arrangement?" the young woman asked Angelle.

"Yes," Angelle said, trying to stay confident, knowing that she had no other choice.

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"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, the hard working people of the greatest nation on Earth," Jashor began.

"Today, we are here to continue the great tradition of the National Debate, a most important event that has to be held before each national election. But today, things will also be different. As you can see, I haven't invited a panel to ask questions, as per usual practice. This is because I believe many people don't connect well with the traditional format of the debate. Instead, I have decided to arrange it as an informal, friendly chat, between myself and Princess Angelle. I also believe the new format will allow a closer look at both candidates and the issues, without the distraction of the press gallery establishment, who often do not understand what everyday people are concerned about," Jashor said.

"So let's start. Princess Angelle, I must firstly congratulate you on your determination to run for election, and to serve the people of Pacificland. You must understand that the throne is a most important position and to

occupy it one needs to have both a suitable vision and an ability to carry it out. So why do you think you are more qualified, compared to all the other people out there?" Jashor asked.

"Thank you for your congratulations, your majesty. I have decided to run for election because many people told me, even begged me, they wanted me to run. I have decided to run for election also because I believe I have something to offer, something that Pacificland will miss out upon if I don't run. Something along the lines of liberty and equal opportunity, things that have been eroded in our society in the past few decades. As to if I think I'm more qualified than all other people out there, I really cannot answer this question, as nobody else except myself and your majesty are running in this election, and nobody else has articulated a vision and a plan for our future at this time. All I can say is that, I believe what I have to offer is better than what else is available," Angelle said.

"So you really think that you, a 28-year-old who graduated from Royal College not that long ago, are more qualified than me and my 62 years of experience?" Jashor asked.

"I don't know why you keep using the term qualified, but I believe Pacificland will thrive under my rule, and it wouldn't under your continued rule. Why? Because I respect people. I respect that every individual has their own moral agency, and in a fair society we should all have equal moral agency, because we are all equal before the law as citizens. Also, because I care to listen. The liberty and equal opportunity I'm offering is not just theoretical, but practical. It would be useless to offer a theoretical vision of liberty and opportunity, which in practice would lead to the systematic alienation and loss of moral agency of many people out there. I've listened to the economically and systematically

disadvantaged people out there, and I know that our system needs fixing. While you were busy demonizing Occupy Heirs Council and finding a way to shut it down, I was busy listening to people and engaging with them. While you were busy consulting with your cronies and deciding policy in a 'father knows best' way, I was listening to what people actually want, and designing ways to provide them with that opportunity while also maximising everyone else's liberty," Angelle said.

Chapter 45

My Way or The Highway

"I believe you need to learn a few things about governing, young lady. My advisers are all experts in their field, and have extensive political experience. Simply calling them cronies just shows your lack of understanding. Also, does this mean that, if elected, you are going to fire all these experts, and perhaps appoint your own friends, the most controversial party Heirs Council has ever known, to the advisory posts? If so, I do worry much for our future," Jashor said.

"I have no intention to disrespect the expertise of your advisors, and I agree they are mostly indeed experts. If elected, I will undertake a review of all posts, but I have no doubt that I will keep many of your experts on board. Perhaps I should make myself clearer. I

understand that your advisory council is made up of people who mostly agree with you on everything, or at least have decided to agree with you so they can keep their job. That isn't good representation of the wide range of opinions and voices out there. It appears that you have deliberately made it this way by weeding out people who dissent, so you can keep everything your way. The fact that you think I will just appoint my friends as advisors actually shows the way you think yourself, more than anything," Angelle said.

"Where is the evidence for all that you are accusing me of? Don't think you can just make up anything, young lady. This is not Heirs Council, you know. This is serious," Jashor said.

"Don't you call me 'young lady' anymore, like I know nothing, and don't you disparage Heirs Council, because it is still more democratic than

your government," Angelle almost wanted to say. But she didn't, because that would be taking the bait and allowing Jashor to focus on what he wanted to. Instead, she decided to just ignore the insults and stay focussed on the issues.

"We know that at least five of your advisors have been dismissed in recent years, for trying to convince you to allow marriage equality. We know that there may be more who would have wanted to do so, but now won't because they fear for their jobs. We know that quite a few of your ministers and secretaries are supporters of marriage equality, but are simply afraid to speak up because of your attitude," Angelle said.

"Well, I have always maintained that my government is to be a conservative government, governed by conservative

principles and policies. Those who have somehow changed their minds and decided that conservative governance isn't for them are of course welcome to leave the government," Jashor said.

"But at least three of the dismissed advisors are dedicated conservatives, who presented a conservative case for marriage equality to you. They did not waver from their commitment to conservatism, they merely didn't see its application the same way as yourself. So is it dedication to the King Jashor way rather than dedication to conservatism that you are looking for? Is it simply a case of 'my way or the highway'?" Angelle said.

"Well, I believe that gay marriage simply isn't compatible with real conservatism," Jashor said.

"So we're going by King Jashor's version of conservatism now. So it really is 'my way or the highway'," Angelle said.

"Well, we're going by 'real conservatism', nothing else," Jashor said.

"Not according to the majority of the Young Conservatives Association of Pacificland in an anonymous survey, not according to many prominent conservative commentators around the world, at least. So this is really just King Jashor's version of 'real conservatism'. Still quite 'my way or the highway', isn't it," Angelle said.

Chapter 46
A Passing Fad?

"Let's not focus on gay marriage anyway, most people are not interested in that and are already sick and tired of it. I believe gay marriage will be a passing fad, but real marriage will stand the test of time. Like how my way of governance, true and tested over time, will stand the test of time, but your ideology will just be another passing fad, young lady. Already, just in the past few weeks, we saw the implosion of the far left movement in this country, where members resigned from their organisation en masse and former allies turned against each other. When you think about it, this tends to happen a lot within movements that are passing fads, and this is indeed how such fads often come to pass. We surely don't want a government losing direction and imploding like that, right? Which is why I would really worry if young lady and her team took

the reins in a month's time. The next four years would surely be rough," Jashor said.

"Well, I have had a great interest in history, and I surely haven't seen that stubbornness, refusal to adapt in light of changed circumstances, and refusing the listen to the will of the people being a great model of governance at any point in history. On the other hand, my model of governance, based around enlightenment values of liberty, equal opportunity and rational thought, has stood the test of time, proving to be the most stable, most utilitarian, and even the most able to fulfil conservative aims like a strong society and strong families. Throughout history, ideas, institutions and Kings and Queens who have listened and adapted have thrived, while those which have not have lost relevance. It is indeed for the worry of the future of marriage as a strong institution that many young conservatives have become strong

supporters of marriage equality today," Angelle said.

"But are you still so blind that you cannot see the parallels between your own movement and the far-left? Both arose as fads around the same time, both will implode at some point in the future," Jashor said.

"I'm sorry, your majesty, but I'm instead seeing the parallels between your governance and the far-left. Different in content, but similar in methods. A top-down governance where conformity is expected and liberty means nothing. A vision that does not include much freedom. Both of you are too obsessed with imposing your will on the rest of society, rather than let the free market of ideas work out the best solutions in the natural way. But people can only live with taking orders against their own conscience for so long. Sooner or later, it

will not hold. Neither the far-left or your government really respect people's equal moral agency or really listen to what the people out there really want, so neither of you will have people's respect and support for too long, I imagine. The implosion of your party is already under way, with many younger members having resigned because of marriage equality and other issues," Angelle said.

"Well, I think young lady here really doesn't know much about the real world of governance. But we're running out of time today. So I think we should end it here," Jashor said.

"Thanks for your time, your majesty," Angelle said.

Chapter 47

A New Nation

The results came in quickly. In the end, it was a landslide. Jashor's patronising attitude and inability to effectively counter Angelle's questions in the debate shook to the core many people's confidence in him. The lackluster economy and the lack of opportunities for many young people caused growing resentment against the governance and its ideology. The festering sore of the division over marriage equality also made the whole conservative movement directionless and passionless. The end of Jashor's reign had a feeling of inevitability about it, when it finally came.

"It's time to give your victory speech," Natalie said.

Angelle stepped up to the platform.

"Dear ladies and gentlemen, the great people of Pacificland,

I am honoured to be elected to serve Pacificland as its Queen for the next four years. I have to thank all my supporters, all the volunteers, and especially the support of my great family. Thank you mom, thank you dad, and thank you Sam, my great fiancé.

Being Queen of such a great nation is a daunting task, and many people have doubted my experience. Fortunately, for me it's not about my way or the highway. The next four years is not about me shoving my beliefs down society. The next four years will be about you,

your opportunities, your aspirations, and your moral agency. Some people say that when you change the person on the throne you change society. You may wonder what change is in store. The answer is simple: Pacificland will get to know liberty and opportunity like never before. It will get to know and get used to the fact that the way society functions does not need to depend on the whims of the King or Queen at all. Pacificlanders will rediscover their moral agency, and come to learn how to use this birthright well.

But this is all I will say for now. As I said, it's not all about me. So here are the perspectives on what I will do or at least should do, from other people," Angelle said.

Natalie took to the stage next, bringing along a whole group of people, including Katie, Jenelle and others.

"I'm Natalie. You may know me as the Chairperson of the Heirs Council, but I am also a close friend of Angelle. It may surprise some of you that Angelle hasn't always been a supporter of marriage equality. I was the first person to convince her about it. But the thing was, she was a listener, and wouldn't let the prejudices of her own upbringing get in the way. And I'm talking about back in 2003 too, back when it was an unconventional idea. Angelle doesn't shy away from the unconventional, and doesn't feel a need to conform to everyone's ideas. I'm sure that under her reign, Pacificlanders will also learn to love the idea of being unique, of developing and acting on one's own conscience, and of respecting other people's different ideas."

"I'm Jenny, supporter and friend of Angelle, who once quit her camp and came back a

decade later. I first joined her camp because I was friends with Natalie, and later quit because I was pressured by my family and church, who said I shouldn't support or even be friends with a so-called gay marriage activist. But the truth was that, gay marriage activist she was not. She was only concerned about freedom and equal opportunity for everyone, and something she calls equal moral agency. Later on, she was crucial to bringing conservatives around to support marriage equality on family values grounds and support other aspects of liberty and equality too. Her inclusive approach not only made me eventually comfortable to rejoin her camp, but I was also able to convince my family and some church friends to become supporters. Angelle is Queen who will rule for all, and do so equally. The culture wars will come to an end under her reign."

"I'm Ashley, Natalie's sister. I'm also in a same-sex marriage. We got married in 2006 overseas

and it's high time this marriage is recognised here. It's just one of the things Angelle will fix. Not so long ago I was almost an outcast among my gay friends for supporting Angelle. People thought I was doing it for Natalie's sake. Why should we, as a community, support Angelle, when she wouldn't support every one of our demands, some would say. It's true that Angelle has never supported us getting special rights like our own dedicated LGBT representative in parliament, or the ability of gay clubs to exclude straight people, but that's because she treats everyone the same way. Where we are being treated inferiorly, as in marriage laws, Angelle is passionate to fix. In fact, when those on the left that my gay friends used to support eventually turned on us, asking us to wait indefinitely for marriage equality or be called selfish, it was Angelle who came to the rescue. Angelle recognises that there is nothing selfish about demanding for your rights and to have them as soon as possible, and nobody has a responsibility to sacrifice their rights for a vague

so-called greater good. I'm sure that any minorities out there who are still being mistreated, she will come to your assistance in the same way."

"I'm Katie, supporter and friend of Angelle. My admiration for her began during the 2004 Heirs Council campaign, where she was the underdog who wouldn't bend her values to suit the then fashion of the times. Throughout the years, Angelle has stayed true to her values, even as the political winds blew one way, and then the other. You always know what Angelle stands for."

"I'm Chee, founder of the former movement called Occupy Heirs Council. We set out as a movement for liberty and equal opportunity for the 99% of society, and was surprised that an apparently privileged MHC would have time for us. Later on, we were hijacked by the far-left

and then quashed by Jashor, in a parallel with many similar movements overseas. But our goal had at least been partially met. Our concerns were heard by a future Queen, and her policies have taken our concerns into account."

"I'm Senator Ramstown, failed candidate for the throne in 2013. Angelle shares a lot of my values, although I have to say that she is probably more philosophical and I'm more pragmatic. She supported my campaign in 2013, and the far-left used an irrelevant Heirs Council controversy to discredit me through discrediting her. She actually felt guilty about it, and withdrew from politics altogether. For many months, I wrote to her to convince her that it was not her fault, and that it would be a waste if she just withdrew from public life. I was prepared to be disappointed. But when we explained to her that there was no other hope last year, she rose to the challenge, rising high

into the sky from the ashes. Angelle doesn't disappoint her supporters, I later learnt."

"I'm Jenelle, newly elected Cultural Princess in the Class of 2016, and a, you can say, frenemy, of Angelle. For most of my time at Royal College I saw Angelle as an enemy, simply because my family taught me that her kind were troublemakers. I also used to believe that good governments are the ones that uphold traditional practices and institutions, and put troublemakers in their place. But this was not good government, or even good conservatism. It was just elitist dictatorship. While culturally I remain a dedicated conservative, I have since realised that liberty-based governance is the best bet in the long run for anyone with a conscience, conservative or otherwise. I also have to say that Angelle has been both a worthy adversary and a great friend. A worthy adversary, because she would really put effort into thinking about arguments you put to her

rather than just mouth the usual clichés, and a great friend, because even if you were once enemies with her, she will still care about your feelings, apparently. So King Jashor, you can be sure that Angelle won't mistreat you the way you mistreated her."

THE END

Story 3:

3 Movements (Feminism, LGBT Rights, Marriage Equality), 2 Diaries, 1 Trans Woman's Message

2020 Updated Edition

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Disclaimer

While effort has been made to describe accurately the historical events referenced in the book, the accuracy of such events described cannot be guaranteed.

Preface (2020 Edition)

This book was written during the time of my (brief) support of the 'intersectional feminism' movement. At the time, I thought that the intersectional movement held potential for a liberalization of feminism, to move away from the identity politics focus, and back towards the universalist values of early feminism. Since then, I have given up on the intersectional movement, because it appears to have an elite establishment that has a set view on certain things, blocking the path towards any such liberalization. Furthermore, backlash towards intersectional feminism has grown over time, and I no longer think we can salvage the concept without creating unnecessary conflict and misunderstanding at this point. However, I still stand by everything I said during that time, and I'm still looking for ways to liberalize the feminist movement. Therefore, the core message of this book still stands.

The story of Natalie doesn't represent the story of one actual person, but was inspired by multiple stories in real life. My intention in writing this book was to show how the concept of liberty would be of great benefit to both feminism and the LGBT community, and 'progressives' should go back to embracing liberty, like how the early feminists of 100 years ago did, like how most Western

'progressives' did, until the corruption that occurred during the radical 'long 1968'.

Note that, I don't necessarily agree with everything Natalie has said in the book, as her character is meant to reflect the views of an 'average LGBT young adult' in our time, rather than my own views. However, in a truly liberal (classical liberal?) society, there will be plenty of room for both someone like Natalie and someone like myself to pursue what we believe in.

Lastly, I chose Australia as the setting for this story because it provides an additional political storyline to the more commonly heard storylines of British, American, and to some extent even Canadian politics. Most politically engaged Australians are aware of British and American political events, but the reverse is generally not true. Therefore, only by choosing Australia as the setting for the story can we realistically capture all the major political events in the Western English speaking world during the period.

Opening Words

I could have written a manifesto of inclusive feminism, but I know that some of you would still be unconvinced.

So instead here is a story, inspired by real life stories I have known. I am sure many of you will be convinced of the need for a more inclusive feminism after reading this.

Stay strong and keep the dream alive,

TaraElla.

Diary One

Chapter 1: 2003 Entries

April 2003

Introduction

Dear diary,

This is the first entry, so I'll introduce myself.

My name is Natalie. Or this is what I call myself, because others call me a different name. You see, they perceive me as a boy, even though I'm really a girl. I'll have to resolve this later. But for now, this is how it is.

I have just turned 16.

I like music, getting to know different cultures, collecting things, and computers. And I'm developing an increasing interest in politics too.

I hope that over the coming months and years, you will come to know me better.

Love,

Natalie.

May 2003

Does School Have To Be Like This?

I hate putting on my school uniform. Why? It marks me out as 'male'. But the rules say I have to wear it anyway.

Why do schools have to be so mean, to make rules that make people unhappy? Well, you may say that they don't make these rules for trans people. That's definitely true, trans people are so rare that schools and rule makers are generally unaware of our existence. I mean, my school isn't 'bad' anyway, they have made an effort to make gay students feel included, for example, which is better than what many other schools are like. You can't expect them to know about trans students, right?

But why does the school have to have a male and female uniform? Out there, in the real world, many clothes are unisex nowadays. But schools are like, stuck in the 19th century, where all clothes are either male or female.

Let's ask another question. Why can't trans students go to school as their real gender? This would work well, right? But there would certainly be an uproar from other parents. There have indeed been a few cases around the world where trans students have attempted to go to school as their real gender, but it hasn't always worked out well apparently. Which explains why there have only been very few cases of this happening. This also only happens in some very open-minded, 'progressive' areas, and I'm sure where I live doesn't count as one. Furthermore, all of the handful of cases I know of are in places where students don't have to wear a uniform. I guess this makes it easier too.

Which brings me back to the uniform, and rules in general. Rules are bad for minorities. Rules are inflexible, and minorities who aren't well catered for get caught up in them. Which is why society shouldn't have that many rigid rules, in my opinion.

June 2003

Gay Marriage, Milestone One

So gay marriages have arrived in the English-speaking world. The Supreme Court in Ontario, Canada declared that gay marriages should be legal, and the Canadian Prime Minister decided that he would accept the ruling. Ontario has since started issuing marriage licences, even though gay marriages have not been legalised in federal law yet. Prime Minister Chretian says his government will do this next, but the conservative opposition wants to ban gay marriages instead, so it can go either way now. But even if the future is uncertain, many Canadian gay couples have already applied to get married, and even several couples here in Australia plan to travel there to get married. It appears that they will take any opportunity available.

Public opinion is generally not on the side of gay marriage. There's been an increase in support since the 1990s when the issue was first debated, but supporters are still in the minority even in most Western countries.

Several months ago I had a long and deep thought about this matter, and I decided that I should support gay marriage. I mean, gay people aren't going to change or go away, so why deny them something that they want? Last month I talked about how rigid rules were making minority people's lives hard, and here's another good example of this. If gay marriage is legal, most men will still marry women and most women will still marry men, and life will still go on. But for about 2% of the population, it will mean everything to them. Why is this so hard to understand, for the majority of people?

At least, this is the first milestone for gay marriage in the English-speaking world. While the issue has been debated on-and-off for some time as some kind of far-fetched idea, it is finally 'getting real'. We don't know where this will lead, but I'm happy that at least the conversation has started properly.

October 2003

Developing An Image

One important task for all women is to develop a sense of dress. A dress style that suits your body type and presents your personality. While genetic girls have many years to develop this, trans girls don't. I haven't even come out to my family yet, but I see this as an important part of my preparation for the future.

In truth, it's all trial and error. I can't count how many times I've bought something that doesn't really suit me, and wasted what little money that I've got. On the internet there are older trans women with websites regularly showing off new outfits that they have bought, but as a teenager I don't have nearly as big a budget. Not that I would want to look like them either - they look like they are going to a fashion show every day, but I just want to look 'normal'. But

it's really a challenge to 'explore' your sense of style on such a limited budget either way.

Trans girls also lack the benefit of sharing opinions about dress styles with other girls, as they grow up. However, the internet trans community is of great help in filling this void nowadays. We can upload and share our photos, and encourage each other in our comments. I'm not confident enough to share my style with the world yet, but hopefully soon I will be confident enough to start engaging in this process.

Chapter 2: 2004 Entries

April 2004

Trans Girls Not Welcome?

Lately I have been very into reality TV. American Idol is my favourite, but there are many others. I like watching people chase their dreams, stepping up to new challenges week after week, trying to do their best. In fact, their spirit has become great inspiration to many people around the world. For most shows, there are also internet forums, where fans can gather to discuss the show, and of course, cheer on their favourites. Quite a few on there have also said that their favourites have inspired them to try out next year.

So what about me? Do I want to try out? It's complicated. In an ideal world, I would. But I

wouldn't want to go 'as a boy'. It's not the real me, and I don't want people cheering on someone that's not the real me. Can I go 'as a girl'? Maybe. After all, drag queen Courtney Act was on last year's Australian Idol. But then, she didn't get into the top 12. Besides, drag queens are often seen as just a bit of entertainment, actual trans girls may be seen quite differently. So it's probably not worth it.

Feminists complain about the glass ceiling limiting women's advancement. But then, trans girls don't get even the opportunities average people enjoy. How can this not be a bigger problem?

June 2004

It Can Go Either Way Now

One year ago, gay marriage arrived in the English-speaking world, in Ontario, Canada. Since then, court rulings in Massachusetts have made it the first US state to have gay marriage, and similar rulings have also been handed down in several other Canadian provinces. Gay marriage is shaping up to be a hot topic this year.

But there also appears to be a danger in this. Forces opposed to reform are now mobilising, especially for the US Presidential elections later this year. They plan to set up referenda in many states across the US to prohibit similar court rulings in the future. With public opinion still firmly against gay marriage, they expect to win. President Bush may even support a nationwide gay marriage ban, it's currently unclear whether

he may pursue this. Meanwhile, Democratic candidate John Kerry has said that he does not support gay marriage either, but appears to be open to civil unions, i.e. arrangements like marriage but not called marriage. Still much better than what we've got now.

July 2004

The Religious Right in Politics

There is increasing interest in the rise of the so-called religious right in politics, in the light of their efforts to place gay marriage bans on the ballot in multiple US states in November this year.

I read a few articles discussing this, and I also did a bit of research. And it has got me worried. Real worried. Apparently, the religious right has a vast network of resources, and have been busily spreading fear about gay marriage and encouraging opponents to enrol to vote for November. It appears that the Republican Party likes this too, as these 'new voters' are very likely to go their way. It is at least partially for electoral advantage too that they are considering a federal ban on gay marriage. Meanwhile, even though John Kerry has ruled

out supporting gay marriage, even his sympathy to civil unions is not acceptable to this crowd. Apparently, they believe gay couples should have exactly no rights before the law.

The religious right campaign may have already had some effect on the presidential race. Earlier this year, Kerry was clearly in front, but now it appears that Bush is the favourite. Which I don't like to see, not only because of the gay rights issue, but also because I believe Bush should be punished for last year's War in Iraq.

Meanwhile, I also worry that the religious right agenda is not just about being anti gay marriage. I also found that sections of the religious right, being Christian fundamentalists, are very hostile to those of other religions. Since 2001, in the wake of 9/11, there's already been a worrying problem of rising Islamophobia and its associated encouragement of

xenophobia and hawkish foreign policy. We really don't need the religious right to encourage this further. We want world peace, not religious wars.

August 2004

Australia Bans Gay Marriage Too

Whatever happens in the US politically is sure to affect events in Australia. This week, Prime Minister John Howard successfully imported the idea of introducing bans on gay marriage to prevent courts from ordering its recognition. A few cases before the Family Court involving gay couples married overseas asking for recognition have given Howard the perfect opportunity.

As in the US, electoral politics is a strong part of the consideration, notwithstanding Howard's own conservatism on gay rights. The opposition Labor party had been dragging its feet on this issue for a few months now, but now that an election is coming up in several weeks' time, they too fear electoral backlash if they didn't allow Howard to get his way. So they waved this unjust piece of legislation through,

although quite a few Labor politicians abstained from the vote.

It should be noted that while I have personally been a passionate supporter of gay marriage for nearly two years now, it's actually still not a major topic even among gay activists here. Why? The main reason lies in the existence of de-facto couple rights in Australia, at least on the state level. In Australia, couples who live together for a period of time have most of the rights of marriage. At state level, these rights have been extended to gay couples in recent years. At federal level, the Howard government remains resistant to this idea, but if the Labor party wins office, it is expected that they will take it up. So the main reason for needing gay marriage in the US, i.e. that everything from hospital visitation rights to the joint filing of taxes necessarily depends on it, does not exist here.

And if the legal rights of marriage can be obtained otherwise, a substantial segment of the gay community just wouldn't want to fight for marriage rights. And it's not just because they would rather have one less fight. Many gay people remain sceptical, even oppositional, to the idea of marriage, saying that it is assimilationist. I really don't understand this, to be frank. Gay people don't form a race of their own, like black people or Asian people, because they aren't necessarily born and raised in gay families. Hence there's no issue of 'assimilationism' vs 'multiculturalism', of retaining or losing one's heritage culture. The fact that they aren't accepted fully by mainstream society is another matter. But wouldn't gay marriage just address this?

Anyway, now that the battle lines have been drawn, I'm sure Australian gay activists will be

more interested in the marriage issue. Already there have been protests around Howard's actions. I'm sure the interest won't die down. Howard may have given us a gift, ironically.

November 2004

The Worst Result

It was never likely to end happily, but this year's US elections were horrible. Anti gay marriage referenda passed in every state they were on the ballot, meaning that the introduction of gay marriage by courts or state legislatures is now prohibited in more than 30 states. The Republicans' strategy to court the religious vote also triumphed: not only has President Bush been returned, but they now control both houses of Congress. Analysts are already wondering if the Democratic party has any chance at all of getting back into government in the short to medium term. With the Republican party benefiting so much from the religious right, this bloc is expected to have an increased say in future government policies.

Post-election analysis have paid particular attention to the religious vote, or 'values voters'. Which is probably just a nicer way to say voters who were stridently opposed to gay marriage, given that this was the only 'values' issue being widely debated this year. There are now suggestions that the Democrats should engage with these voters, and perhaps somewhat alter their platform to suit these voters. This makes me very worried indeed. While the immediate results of this election was bad enough, if a 'bipartisan consensus' forms around a need to bow down to the demands of the religious right, a lot of needed reform will be blocked for a generation or more.

Perhaps it was only a 'messaging' problem, other people have suggested. For example, the religious right has painted gay marriage and its supporters as anti-family, and their platform as pro-family-values. But what's so anti-family

about encouraging gay couples to get committed and 'settle down'? These election results have also prompted the rise of a 'religious left', who criticise the religious right for failing to address the economic needs of many struggling families. How is this consistent with family values? The truth is that the religious right agenda is not 'the family values agenda', and its opponents are not anti-family either. We need to get this message out, before it's too late.

Perhaps what we have got is a wake-up call. We really need to fight for our values. We really need to engage with the public and explain and argue for what we believe in. Otherwise, our opponents will gain the upper hand, by default.

Chapter 3: 2005 Entries

January 2005

Coming Out As A Supporter

I have just realised that there has been a silver lining to last year's gay marriage setbacks: that most people who know me, including my parents, now know my support for the reform. My parents still don't support it, but they have not tried to change me either. Best of all, I didn't need to specifically discuss this issue. I just made it one of the reasons I didn't like Bush and Howard, whenever I was discussing politics in the past few months.

If only coming out as trans was as easy.

February 2005

A Missed Opportunity

So tomorrow I start university. It represents the first 'reasonable' opportunity in which I can be my real self. While openly trans students in high school are extremely rare, I know of plenty of people who are openly trans (or even trans but in 'stealth mode') in universities around the world. Unlike in high school, many universities have anti-discrimination policies, and there isn't going to be an uproar from other parents in any case.

I would have loved to start as my real self, but I know it's really not happening now. I had all summer to work up the courage to come out, but I still didn't. I really fear how my parents would react. You never know. But I guess it wouldn't be entirely smooth, to say the least. Starting at a new school is stressful enough, and

part of me really thinks I don't need this extra stress. So the whole summer was spent wrestling between action and inaction. And inaction won out.

Because I didn't come out to my parents, going to university as my real self would pose several problems. The biggest one is that several people on campus are my parents' friends, and word of me presenting as 'someone else' will quickly get back to them. It will even spread among their friends, causing them much embarrassment. This is really NOT a good way to come out.

So tomorrow could have really been the start of a new life. But let's face it - it won't be.

April 2005

Only in the Netherlands?

I'm still struggling with coming out: what (to say), when, how. One of the biggest problems is that people have been used to who I appeared as, even though that's not entirely the real me. I mean, the personality is real, but I would rather present as a different gender. Would people understand?

Wouldn't it have been simpler if I could have 'always' lived authentically? Or, as close to that as possible, like coming out very early on? I mean, I've known since age 3 anyway, so I've already lost nearly 15 years. Which is almost inevitable for trans people. I mean, none of us get to come out and live authentically before a certain age anyway. There are some things trans people always miss out on, and the first

decade and a half or so of gender appropriate experiences is one of them.

Unless you were born in the Netherlands, and recently. There have been recent reports from that country that some transgender kids have been allowed to live authentically from a very young age. If only we all had the same opportunity! But the Netherlands is a special country. It was the first to legalise gay marriage, for example. (It's been four years and the sky hasn't fallen in.)

June 2005

Gay Marriage in Canada

It appears that the government of Canada has finally been able to legalise gay marriage nationwide, after a very tight vote in parliament. Along with the Netherlands and Belgium, three countries now have gay marriage. However, it may still be premature to celebrate as yet, as opponents of gay marriage have said they will continue to fight it. It still cannot be ruled out that a future conservative government may repeal gay marriage altogether.

Still, people are already celebrating. With victories so hard won and hard to come by in recent times, any victory, 'solid' or not, deserves to be celebrated. Even if the future is uncertain, it is certainly wise to make the most of every opportunity available.

As expected, not everyone is celebrating. My friends in Canada have told me that there has been homophobic graffiti in their city recently. But that's just to be expected. With every progress comes resistance.

Meanwhile, I understand that the UK is considering the introduction of Civil Partnerships, also often called 'civil unions' in other jurisdictions. This type of scheme would allow almost all the rights of marriage to be granted to gay couples, but without access to the 'title' of marriage. Still unfair, but still better than what's available right now. And of course, much less controversial and 'easier' for politicians to support and enact.

September 2005

Sick of Missing Out

I will say this: trans people often feel like we're only living half a life.

I've missed out on more than 18 years of gender appropriate experiences already, and every day I'm missing out on more. It won't change until I work up the courage to come out and present as my real self. I still don't know when I will be confident enough to overcome the barriers involved.

But I'm indeed sick of missing out. I've missed out on gender appropriate experiences all my life. Like being treated like a girl. Dresses. Certain toys. Not having to play sport with the boys. Going out as a group of girls to see our favourite pop bands.

And the list is still growing. Recent additions include graduating high school as a girl, proudly having her graduation photo taken. Also, starting university as a confident young woman.

These things are taken for granted by almost every one. But when you have to watch others experience them while you continue to live a lie, it really hurts.

I'm really scared I won't have the courage to do anything about it, and life will just pass me by as I grow old, the list of missed experiences getting longer and longer every year.

October 2005

Is Feminism Relevant Anymore?

Today, I read an article discussing if feminism is relevant to our times anymore. The author made the point that most young women don't actively identify as feminists nowadays, because they do not feel its relevance to them. They feel that the main goals of feminism, like voting rights, equal pay for the same work and anti-discrimination laws have all been achieved even before they were born. They just don't feel that feminism has anything to offer them.

I think that if young women today don't embrace feminism, it's not their fault. Rather, it may be the fault of feminism itself. If feminism claims to be a movement that is about empowering women, it certainly isn't living up to its ideal, from the point of view of today's young women. Maybe it's because feminism

isn't listening. What I mean is, it hasn't been inclusive and adaptive enough to meet the needs of modern young women.

Speaking as somebody who identifies as female, feminism has also failed me. While they claim to be against the 'patriarchy', many feminists are even more transphobic than the patriarchy itself. Moreover, the 'rights' that the feminist movement are all about sometimes feel like another layer of exclusion to me. The anti-discrimination that they support is clearly for 'women born women' only, and some feminists have even opposed anti-discrimination laws for trans people. The affirmative action they support is again for 'women born women' only, and every time I apply for something and know that I will be considered as a 'man' for the purposes of affirmative action, it increases my gender dysphoria ten-fold. Most feminists don't even care about the likes of myself.

The point is, if feminism has ceased to be relevant, it's because older feminists haven't actually listened to what young women really want, and haven't been inclusive enough.

Chapter 4: 2006 Entries

January 2006

Working Up The Courage

I'm working up the courage to come out. To my parents at least, because otherwise it would be impossible to go 'full time' at university. I am determined to start this year authentically.

But it's really not easy. Firstly, there's the uncertainty of what will happen. It is not even unheard of for parents to disown their trans children, even though I don't believe this is likely in my case. Still, invalidation and some form of rejection is likely, and it's not going to be a nice feeling.

Secondly, since trans awareness is so low, my parents may mistakenly think that I am mentally ill, and drag me to some psychiatrist. Which is not a bad outcome in and of itself, both because they would be able to explain to my parents what transgender (or gender dysphoria, the technical term) is, and because trans people have to go through a psychiatrist to get treatment anyway. Having my parents pay for some of these sessions would be great. However, having my parents fear that I may be mentally ill will create a very stressful situation at home.

Finally, there's also the issue of what to say, exactly. The idea of transgender doesn't come up in everyday conversations, you see. I have to think of a way to bring it up, without making it sound like a joke, and without causing misunderstanding. It's much harder than it sounds. It's almost like trying to tell someone you're actually an alien all along.

February 2006

I Hope I Can Make This Work

I came out to my parents three weeks ago. Coming out was rough, as expected. It turned out that my parents hadn't even heard of trans people before, except for one controversial case before the Family Court of a trans teen seeking treatment two years ago. They did drag me to a psychiatrist, who did convince them I didn't go mad. So that part is now resolved.

So here's the deal I got. I am free to do whatever at university, but can't walk out of their house 'in a dress'. So I can dress in a unisex manner, perhaps with some makeup, when leaving home, but I would have to change once I get to my campus. And I would have to change again before I come home.

It's not ideal, but I think I can make it work. At least it's a chance to start a new life.

I can't say my parents are accepting at this stage, but there's going to be plenty of time to work on that.

April 2006

So Far, So Good

It's been five weeks of 'new me' at university. And it's been surprisingly 'smooth'.

All my friends have accepted the 'new me'. A few were surprised, but they were OK with it. Unlike my parents, they did understand what being trans was. Perhaps the younger generation has had more exposure to stories of trans people.

I was advised by some to visit the LGBT centre on campus, to see if I could get support there. Not surprisingly, even the staff there hadn't seen a trans person before. (That's how rare we are!) I was a curiosity even there. Nor were they able to provide any support, beyond some words of comfort. Therefore, I didn't go back.

Since then, life has simply gone on.

I am gradually 'transitioning' my dress style. I still dress unisex, feminine unisex is how I would describe it. I will gradually present more femininely. It's more comfortable for everyone this way.

My assessment: so far, so good.

June 2006

It Still Feels Surreal

It's been several months since I came out to everyone. And it still feels surreal.

It still feels surreal that I've let the world know my 'lifelong secret'.

I mean, to be trans in and of itself has always carried with it a surreal feeling. Being trans, I have always been aware that I have a 'condition' that almost nobody on Earth understands, and that is shared by less than 1/1000 people (or even less than 1/10000 people by some estimates).

Having to talk about it again and again, having to explain it again and again in the past few months only made it even more surreal.

I'm now preparing to dress more femininely. The first thing to do was of course to 'test drive' my new dress style. So I travelled across town for the sole purpose of walking around in a shopping mall in a dress, to see if I get any stares or strange looks. Luckily I got none. But the whole experience felt surreal, almost as if I was playing Second Life, but with me being physically in the computer walking around the virtual landscapes. Maybe it was because I was actually a bit nervous. It's not as if it was my first time wearing a dress, but still it was my first time doing so in public.

Overall, life still feels normal. But every now and then, there has been an extra surreal quality to it, especially when dealing with

transition related stuff. Sort of just like the idea of being trans is surreal to most people.

August 2006

The Paper Trail

One of the hassles of gender transition is the need to change your documents. And even though I am only 20, and I don't have bank loans, mortgages, insurance policies, or even a car, there are actually many documents to be changed. To make things more difficult, each document is handled by a different organisation or government department, each with different rules on what other documents you need to bring, and what forms you need to fill out. (In contrast, most people only change their name due to marriage, and a marriage certificate would generally suffice for that.) To make things even more difficult, some departments are only open on certain days, and some are located at inconvenient locations I've never been before.

The key to success here is to have good organisation. Firstly, you need to decide which ones to change first. Doing them in a certain order can make everything more convenient. Secondly, each document to be changed needs to be treated like a project on its own, ideally with its own folder. For every such 'project', there are forms to fill and supporting documents to keep track of. Finally, you need to arrange for times to visit the departments, some of which require bookings. I guess in this regard I'm luckier because I'm still a student.

And then there's the nervousness, and the surreal quality of it all. Throughout the process, I kept wondering what the man or woman reading my application was thinking. Did they see me as weird? Have they handled other trans cases before? (Probably not.) Are they surprised to receive my case? (Probably yes.) Everyone I've come across have been very professional, though.

It's no wonder that some trans people just keep putting off the whole process for years, or only do some of it. Besides actually costing some money, it is also both intellectually and emotionally demanding, especially if you want to get it right in one go. I guess it would be particularly difficult for those in a depressed mood.

Shouldn't it be easier?

October 2006

The Internet Trans Community

The internet has been a gift for trans people. In fact, before there was an internet, there probably wasn't a trans community per se. There were trans support groups and organisations in some large cities, but they could hardly be called a 'community'. Trans individuals are so rare that it would be difficult for them to form a community in any physical location, except maybe San Francisco.

The internet has been the first place many trans people, myself included, first learned about the options for transitioning. It was also the first place in which many trans people, myself included, came out to the wider world. It also appears that the trans community has an especially high proportion of computer geeks. This perhaps explains why the trans community

has very effectively utilised the internet since its early days.

Through the internet, we learn about the existence of other trans people, so that we feel less lonely. We are also able to share 'passing tips', comment on each other's photos, and sort of go through things like coming out at school or work and the endless document changes together. These are all trans-specific experiences that many trans people would have to go through alone if not for the internet.

As previously discussed, gender transition has felt surreal in multiple aspects for me. Knowing that other people are also going through similar things has made it less surreal, though. Even if they may live on the other side of the world.

Chapter 5: 2007 Entries

January 2007

The Pronoun Fear

For trans people, to 'pass' simply means to be taken as a member of the gender you present as. I would like to think that I 'pass' most days, but there are still days when I don't. Or more accurately maybe, people to whom which I don't.

Which brings me to the pronoun fear. To be referred to by the wrong pronouns is an invalidation of our identity. And, for me, it also feels like 'punishment' for not passing. Each time someone refers to me by the wrong pronoun, it feels like being punched in the stomach. It's probably something only trans people can understand.

If only we lived in a world where people simply understood and accepted trans people, where there wouldn't be a need to 'pass', and where people will always use pronouns accordingly. If only.

But then trans people are so rare, it would probably be impossible (and unreasonable) to ask the world to change the way it runs for us.

February 2007

New Year at University

Tomorrow marks the beginning of my third year at university.

Last year was sort of overshadowed by trans issues, but hopefully this year I will be just another student again. Things like coming out to people, having to explain yourself again and again. Things like changing your paperwork, going through the so-called paperwork trail, having to explain yourself all the way. Hopefully now that it's over, life can be a bit more, well, 'normal' again.

Normally, I would be the last person to want to be 'average' in anything, but when it comes to being overtly trans vs blending in, I prefer to be 'more average', like most trans people. If the

world didn't see us as either freaks or curiosities then maybe we would have a different attitude. But then, we don't live in that world.

Being trans shouldn't dominate my life for more than a short period of time, and hopefully it won't.

March 2007

Not That Much Has Changed

A favourite topic of discussion among the internet trans community is 'how is life different now that you're perceived as a different gender'.

To be honest, not that much has changed. I love the way I look and I love my clothes, but I don't see much of a change in my life. Certainly, you would expect that people who know already me wouldn't treat me differently. But I am a university student and I meet new people every day. I can say with confidence that I have not noticed any substantial change in the way strangers or newly introduced people treat me.

There have been a few subtle changes, like other women complimenting me on my clothes

and accessories, and that's very nice. I feel that men are more likely to hold doors open for me, but this is not a consistent thing, nor did this consistently not happen last year. I like the subtle changes, but I have to say they are subtle.

Maybe more changes will come. Maybe not. We'll see.

May 2007

Trans and Feminism

The relationship between transwomen and feminism is, complicated.

Feminists are currently divided on how they perceive us. There are those who think that only 'women born women' (as if we aren't) should be included, and there are those who believe that transwomen should be included too. Those who want to exclude us have traditionally been the majority view in feminism, but some younger generation feminists are now arguing for change in their movement. Still, it appears that those who want to exclude us continue to have the upper hand.

On the other hand, many transwomen actually want to be feminists. It is as if they see being a feminist, and acceptance by other feminists, as the ultimate validation of their identity as a woman. Transwomen who are feminists often call themselves transfeminists. In fact, there are websites dedicated to the idea of transfeminism. Transfeminists regularly join with other trans-friendly feminists to argue for trans inclusion, against old-school feminists, using the internet as their battleground.

I see it this way: I have no interest in joining a club that doesn't want me there anyway. I do appreciate that quite a few younger feminists want to welcome us into their movement, but it is clear that many feminists, maybe the majority, are still hostile to us. I feel that, in the feminist club, I would have to battle even harder to have my identity recognised than in the outside world. So, no thanks.

By the way, it's not as if you have to be in the feminist club to be a real woman. Just two years ago, I read a newspaper article questioning if feminism is still relevant. Many young women our age actually don't want to identify as feminists. Some feel that the term is associated with a 'boys vs girls' attitude, and others think that the big feminist fights are over in the West anyway. So not belonging to the feminist club doesn't make you less of a woman. In fact, it may mean that you are simply with the majority of young women nowadays.

August 2007

Maybe That's The Way It Should Be

A few months ago I recorded whatever (few) changes I saw in my life as a result of being perceived as a different gender. At the time I was semi-expecting to see more changes as time went on.

But I have to say, no, my life is still mostly the same as before. I love not being referred to by a male name and male pronouns, but apparently I'm still the same person. As I'm still the same person with the same personality, the way I interact with people and the way people treat me have remained very similar to before. What else should I expect?

And in this day and age, it's not like that men and women are treated very differently

anyway. We don't live in the 1950s anymore, and I'm thankful for that. So what was I thinking, expecting that people would somehow treat me 'very differently'?

I guess the idea of being treated 'very differently' as a result of gender transition comes from the observation that masculine men and feminine women are certainly treated in different ways by their peers, mainly as a result of the different ways they interact with the world. But trans people don't go from very masculine men to very feminine women. I didn't put up a masculine act two years ago, and I don't put up an ultra feminine act now. I wouldn't have interacted with the world like the very masculine man back then, and don't interact with the world like the very feminine woman today. Whatever gender I am perceived as, I always interact with the world as myself, in my own style. Consequently, it shouldn't be

surprising that I am received in a similar manner.

Many internet trans women love to say things like they lost 'male privilege'. I don't know if it's a genuine reflection or just another attempt to look 'feminist'. Even before transition I did not notice much 'male privilege' in everyday life, but back then, as I had not experienced living as a girl my opinion probably wasn't as valid. But recent experience has, if anything, confirmed my previous view. Certainly, there may be an element of 'male privilege' if you want to be a CEO or a politician, but to experience 'male privilege' or 'female disprivilege' everywhere in everyday life is a bit of a stretch of imagination in my opinion.

One of the surprisingly important things I have learnt through gender transition is that gender is only one 'property' of a person, and not the

most important one by far. It doesn't undermine the importance of my transition though, as I had to do it to get the gender 'distraction' out of the way. (It DOES undermine the argument that marriage must be between a man and a woman, and I feel glad that I can now use my personal experience to argue for same-sex marriage.)

November 2007

Getting Back Into Politics

The upcoming Australian election has gotten me back to paying attention to news and politics.

Long serving Prime Minister John Howard is up against Labor opponent Kevin Rudd this time, and polls are indicating that Rudd will win. Which is good news because it means Australia will likely pull out of the Iraq war finally.

There's recently been some controversy around Rudd's refusal to support same-sex marriage. As I understand it, Labor's platform will provide for equal rights for gay couples through both extending the nation-wide de-facto (cohabitation) relationship recognition system to all couples, and the recognition of civil union

or registered partnership systems to be set up by state governments. In other words, gay couples will have equal rights finally, but not 'marriage' itself.

It's really not surprising, given that this appears to be the most common approach among 'progressive' side major parties in the Western world at the moment. Two years ago the UK Labor government set up a civil partnership scheme for gay couples, but maintained that marriage would not change. The New Zealand Labor government also made similar moves. It's really about electoral politics, I guess. Polls have indicated 38% support for same-sex marriage in both Australia and the UK just a few years ago, and you wouldn't expect majority support at this point. We just need to take what we can, and aim to win the battle over the long run. Progress comes in steps.

The other thing that can potentially hold back same-sex marriage is the lack of enthusiasm for it among some gay activists. Both in Australia and the UK, some gay and lesbian commentators have even said that they prefer civil partnerships because they did not like the idea of 'marriage', presumably because of their own feminist or radical beliefs. Just last year some local gay groups and leaders refused to support pushing for the reform, citing other priorities. I think this attitude is unhelpful. Since some gay couples want to get married and denying them this right is discrimination based on sexual orientation, gay activist groups are indeed obliged to fight for this right, whether the leaders themselves like the idea of marriage or not! Wake up!

Chapter 6: 2008 Entries

March 2008

Life is Similar But Different

So it's been one year since my entry about how life is actually quite similar, even when you are perceived as a different gender. And one year on, it's still like that.

I've come to view it this way. Transition doesn't make you a different person. Rather, it makes you a better version of yourself, one unhindered by discomfort on the gender front. It takes away that burden, and lets the person beneath shine.

Life is still similar, of course. I have similar interests, similar attitudes, a similar outlook on

life, even similar political views. But life is different too, because I'm more confident in my interactions, and more naturally at home 'in my own skin', so to say. It's something taken for granted by most people, but it's something I have only had since recently.

The biggest difference is that, I can finally feel confident enough to move into the future knowing that I've left that 'something wrong' behind. All my life until two years ago I had wondered when I would be able to fix this 'problem', and when I would have the courage to do so. I had wondered what would happen when I 'came out', and what effect it would have on both myself and the people around me. It feels good to not have to think about those things anymore.

April 2008

Hope and Change

The US Democrats appear to be getting closer to having Barack Obama as their presidential candidate this year. If elected, he will be the first black president. Two of his most popular slogans are 'hope' and 'change'.

His stated attitude to same-sex marriage appears to be similar to that of Kevin Rudd: gay couples should be able to have equal rights under another name, but not 'marriage'. I guess electorally same-sex marriage is still too controversial to embrace. 'Gay marriage bans' have passed in more states in 2006 and some more are under consideration this year, and I guess it also can't help that the Canadian government which legalised it was voted out less than a year later.

But still, it's clear that his attitude to 'family values' does include gay couples. Which is a great start, because opposition to same-sex marriage is based mostly on a version of 'family values' that exclude gay couples. Like Rudd, Obama has based his opposition to same-sex marriage on just the way things have traditionally been. But I guess this is ultimately a circular argument, and wouldn't hold out for long if the homophobic version of 'family values' is defeated.

There's no inherent reason why 'family values' should be anti-gay. LGBT people are part of many families too, and an increasing number of parents are fighting for the rights of their LGBT children. A version of 'family values' that exclude these families would be no 'family values' at all.

It's time that 'family values' start including LGBT people. I also believe that when we get this new consensus same-sex marriage will become widely supported.

June 2008

I'm Done With Transition. Or Am I?

I guess I can say that I'm done with gender transition. It's not much of an issue for me anymore, in everyday life. I just live my life, without needing to think too much about gender nowadays. On most days, anyway.

But then some people say that a trans person is never really done with transition. There are always some 'trans' aspects of your life that may pop up. Like some document that you forgot to change, or some medical consultation where you have to discuss your medical history. Or even just old friends from high school or earlier who reappear in your life after many years. It may be awkward, but I know I'll have to be prepared for these possibilities.

The difficult thing with being trans is that, whenever something trans-specific comes up, we feel like we have to explain ourselves, to people who may not understand, or even worse, may be transphobic. I guess the same applies to gay people too. But at least people generally know what being gay entails. This comes from the fact that most people know at least several gay people in their lives. Since only one in a few thousand people are trans and many aren't even out, it is unlikely for most people to personally know a trans person. Therefore, it is not uncommon for people to either have no understanding of trans issues at all, or even have misunderstandings. It's almost like being gay in the 1950s, in this sense.

But then, the need to 'explain myself' doesn't really come up often. So most days I'll just be a normal young woman. In this sense, transition is done. I could live with that.

Diary Two

Chapter 7: 2012 Entries

December 2012

Inspired to Restart My Diary

I used to have another diary, where I talked about my gender transition and LGBT politics, particularly same-sex marriage, which by the way is called marriage equality now. I left that diary behind when I felt like I had nothing more to say, mainly because I was done with transition. But recent political and cultural events have made me re-read my old diary. I feel like the world is on the verge of major change, and many of the hopes, dreams and even daydreams I had about a better world may be coming true.

Here is where we are, after the big year of 2012:

Marriage equality is now legal in more than ten countries. Furthermore, the conservative governments of the UK and New Zealand, as well as the newly elected left-wing government of France, are likely to legalise it soon. US President Barack Obama's endorsement of marriage equality a few months ago has provided a further boost to our cause, despite the fact that marriage is decided state-by-state in the US. Just last month, marriage equality passed 52-48 by referendum in the states of Washington and Maryland, the first time a majority vote actually approved of marriage equality anywhere in the world. It means that anti-equality conservatives can't simply point to marriage equality's previous 100% referendum-losing record and say that reform is being forced on unwilling silent majorities anymore.

Hollywood and the entertainment industry have become major backers of marriage equality in recent years. Many celebrities have openly supported the cause. You would think that dance pop singers, who generally have large gay fanbases, would support equality if only for the sake of their own careers. But even several country singers have come out in support of the cause, risking backlash from their conservative fanbases. Meanwhile, gay and lesbian characters and couples have become more and more common in storylines on both the small screen and the big screen.

Here in Australia, we have an atheist, left-wing Prime Minister who remains opposed to marriage equality, quite a unique situation. Actually, the governing Labor party itself has a strong majority in support of marriage equality, as proven by a vote at their national conference last year and a parliamentary vote in September this year. But still, with the

conservative opposition binding their MPs to vote no (justified on the grounds that the party did not support or discuss marriage equality at all in the previous election), the vote itself was lost 98-42. The media reported it as an 'overwhelming' defeat, but I would say this is sensationalism, especially since Labor was the only major party granting a conscience vote, and there was majority Labor support. As for why Prime Minister Julia Gillard remains opposed, some including myself think that her 'traditional' (i.e. 1970s or 80s) feminist beliefs are probably to blame. You see, until recently many feminists have hated the idea of marriage in and of itself.

Trans issues are starting to gain awareness too. In April this year, Jenna Talackova became the first trans contestant of a mainstream beauty pageant, Miss Universe Canada. Controversy over her admission, which was ultimately resolved in her favour, have hit news headlines

around the world, and most people's comments were surprisingly supportive. I have also noticed that the language used in media reports about trans people have become more polite, and the use of offensive, sensationalist terms like 'sex change' or 'sex swap' have certainly gone down. There is now hope for a better conversation. Also this year, hit TV series Glee (often called the 'gayest show on Earth' for its many gay characters and storylines) have started featuring a trans character. Does all this signal that trans people are about to hit the mainstream?

Chapter 8: 2013 Entries

January 2013

What's in a Name?

As I said in my last entry, same-sex marriage is now called 'marriage equality' by most supporters and activists. The name most favoured by opponents remains 'gay marriage', which confusingly is still a name sometimes used by supporters.

There are two justifications for using 'marriage equality'. Firstly, it highlights that gay couples do not want an additional right, and are merely asking for equal treatment under the law. Secondly, it is inclusive of trans and intersex people, who may not be in a same-sex relationship but would still require legal reform to be able to marry. I think these two issues are

very valid, and therefore have adopted the new term myself.

I am concerned that some activists have indeed become very 'politically correct' here though, almost as if 'same-sex marriage' and 'gay marriage' are now homophobic terms. Guess what? They are not. I remember that former Canadian Prime Minister Paul Martin indeed called it 'same-sex marriage' when he presided over the reform in 2005, and UK Prime Minister David Cameron called it 'gay marriage' in his now famous speech about supporting marriage equality and his conservative values. If these are terms that our supporters use too, they should not be derided, even if they are not the best terms. Political correctness turns people off, remember.

So here is what I'll do: I will use the term 'marriage equality' myself, but defend the right

of people to use 'same-sex marriage' and 'gay marriage' if they feel like it.

February 2013

Marriage Equality Tops The Charts

Rapper Macklemore's marriage equality song Same Love has now been at the top of the official Australian music charts for a while. Originally written for the marriage equality referendum in Washington state last year, so far it has failed to make a big impact on most countries' music scene. But somehow enough Australians bought it to make it number one. Now there is also an Australian cover of the song, with the lyrics changed to reflect the local political situation, including some criticism for Prime Minister Julia Gillard.

Maybe people in Australia are more frustrated over this issue than in other countries. For example, there's not much to be frustrated about in the UK by comparison. Last month the Cameron government's marriage equality bill

passed the House of Commons, and it now goes to the House of Lords where it is likely to be approved to become law. While Australian parliament voted more than 2:1 against equality, British parliament voted 2:1 for equality. In Australia both the Prime Minister and the opposition leader remain opposed, while in the UK both the Prime Minister and opposition leader are supportive. This is despite polls showing similar levels of support for the reform in both countries.

Maybe, just maybe, people are buying the song so that our politicians will listen.

April 2013

The Conservative Case for Marriage Equality

New Zealand has become the second English-speaking country where marriage equality is passed under a conservative government. In fact, because unlike the UK the legislation does not need to go before the upper house for confirmation, we should probably say it's the first. The fact that this contrasts with Australia's left-wing Prime Minister Julia Gillard's refusal to support the reform has also not gone unnoticed in Australian media. It just shows that even conservatives may support marriage equality, while 'progressives' are not guaranteed to do so.

Ever since UK Prime Minister David Cameron's speech last year, where he said he supported marriage equality because he was a conservative who believed in marriage, there

has been an increased interest in the so-called conservative case for marriage equality worldwide. It's actually nothing new. I remember reading articles about this idea written by some US Republicans, going as far back as 2009. At that time, it was treated as just a curiosity. But Cameron's stance has propelled this idea into the mainstream.

I remember saying that a new approach to LGBT rights and marriage equality, where they are seen as an extension of 'family values' rather than something radical and challenging to existing society, will help the reform gain widespread support. It appears that my prediction has come true.

Meanwhile, Australia's conservative opposition party still refuses to grant their MPs a conscience vote, which actually represents the biggest roadblock to reform here. (Despite

Gillard's personal objection, most of the Labor party already support equality.) Local marriage equality activists have recently sought to bring about discussion of the conservative case for marriage equality here, in an attempt to increase conservative support and solve this impasse. I think this is a brilliant idea. Reform can only be achieved when we bring as many people together as possible, ideally from across the political spectrum. As activists often like to say, no one party can achieve marriage equality alone.

However, even the beginnings of this new phase of the marriage equality campaign has drawn fire from more radical activists. They claim that this focus will leave the more radical elements of the LGBT community behind. Guess what? Marriage is not meant for those who want radical relationships anyway, gay or straight. Those who believe in radical relationships have left marriage behind already,

in this sense. Marriage equality is mainly a reform that is important to those gay couples who want to get married, and to achieve it soon. Such couples cherish marriage, in the same way as Cameron and other conservatives do. Therefore, the conservative case for marriage equality is actually the voice of a substantial number, perhaps even the majority, of those marriage equality will affect most. I believe that radicals are in effect oppressing gay couples who believe in marriage if they disallow this voice to be heard.

June 2013

Getting Back Into Trans World

Since the time that I felt my gender transition was essentially complete, about five years ago, I had gradually lost contact with most 'transition friends' and haven't paid much attention to the 'trans world'. It's actually quite a common thing for trans people. Only relatively few stay in the community and become long term activists.

But I may be re-entering trans world in the near future, for the sake of a friend. You see, one of my transition time friends, Maria, who almost came out to her family and started transition but never did, is planning to attempt transition again soon. Back in 2006, we promised each other that we would be there for each other's transition and the difficulties involved, no matter what. However, she was never quite able to get her transition started, for multiple

reasons. She was there for my transition though, and I really have to help her through it this time.

It is actually not uncommon for trans people to require multiple attempts at starting or finishing transition. The whole process is complex and ridden with stress everywhere. This was especially the case back in the 1990s and 2000s, with even fewer support services than today. Combine this with the difficult things that can happen to people's lives, sometimes it just becomes too much to handle. Sometimes, there's simply no choice, but to turn back, and try again later.

August 2013

More Important Things

In terms of marriage equality, next month's Australian election provides a clear choice: the recently returned Kevin Rudd, who has also become the first Prime Minister to support marriage equality, or Tony Abbott, who does not support the reform. Unfortunately, the polls indicate that Abbott is in front.

Prior to returning to the Labor leadership in June, Rudd announced his support for marriage equality. Just like Obama, he switched sides and became a supporter. This election, he has pledged to introduce legislation for the reform in the first 100 days of the new parliament, if he is re-elected. On the other hand, not only does Abbott not support the reform personally, his party will not say what it will do regarding the issue in the next three years.

I have been out encouraging people, especially those who have expressed support for marriage equality, to vote for Rudd. Some have said they will do so. However, there are also plenty of others who have said that there are 'more important things to deal with first', implying a vote for Abbott. So you think gay couples who want to get married are not important, and can wait three or more years, right? I wonder how one can call themselves a supporter of marriage equality if they have this attitude. Just vote for Labor once and we'll get it done, and you are welcome to vote conservative again in 2016. Is even that too much to ask?

Polls may indicate that 60% or more Australians support marriage equality. But clearly they are not serious enough about it.

September 2013

Fear of Momentum Loss

So that's it. Abbott won, despite our best efforts to prevent it.

Even more depressingly, some supporters of marriage equality are about to give up, it seems. Several have suggested that we regroup in 2015 to fight the next election. I don't know how many actually hold that attitude. I fear that if this is a common feeling, we may effectively lose many active 'fighters', and lose a lot of momentum in the process. All political reform requires momentum, and if momentum is blunted, it may not return for a long time.

The fact that Abbott opposes marriage equality doesn't mean anyone should give up. After all, we had Gillard, who also opposed marriage

equality, until June this year. But we had momentum, and while Gillard didn't change her mind, many others were persuaded, including Rudd, who almost made equality law. In fact, during the Gillard era, Australia was clearly a major 'hot spot' for marriage equality discussion, second only to the US at times. Maybe many fought hard because they thought she could change her mind, because she was progressive at heart. Maybe the idea of Abbott, a staunch conservative on many issues, changing his mind is too alien for some to contemplate.

But that is stupid. Politics is driven by much more than what the Prime Minister believes. People can and should demand politicians reconsider issues in light of popular support. Even if we can't change Abbott's mind, we can gain supporters from the conservative side of politics, especially since now that they're in government they would have to listen more.

Furthermore, who knows if Abbott is still Prime Minister later this term? In fact, Abbott's main rival in his own party, communications minister Malcolm Turnbull, is a strong supporter of marriage equality.

As polls have shown, the majority of this country supports marriage equality. Our job is to turn them into passionate supporters, who will pressure the government on reform. It's time to step up our campaign, not to give up. We have built up great momentum. To give it all up just because Abbott won would be something to regret.

October 2013

Gillard's Explanation

So former Prime Minister Julia Gillard has finally given a proper explanation as to why she does not support marriage equality. As many people suspected, it is indeed related to her 1980s style feminist views. She simply does not believe in marriage. The fact that she had never married any of her partners should have given everyone a strong hint.

Many marriage equality supporters remain disappointed in her stance. They maintain that one can choose not to participate in marriage but still offer the choice to others. But then, from my understanding, many 1980s feminists feel like they have a responsibility not to encourage marriage in any way. Furthermore, as Gillard herself suggested, historically many gay and lesbian people actually held the same

view on marriage as herself. In fact, since Gillard offered her explanation, plenty of older generation gays and lesbians have indeed 'come out' to 'cheer her on'.

Some overseas people apparently believe that all 'progressives' and all non-religious people must support marriage equality. This belief is especially common in countries like the US, where almost all opposition to marriage equality comes from the religious right. But in Gillard we have a good example of someone who opposes marriage equality on 'progressive' grounds, just like in (British PM) Cameron we have a good example of someone who supports marriage equality on conservative grounds. It just shows that marriage equality is ultimately not owned by 'progressives' alone.

November 2013

Feminism vs Marriage Equality

This is a discussion on the fact that some feminists are actively opposed to marriage equality.

Don't get me wrong. Most feminists today actively support marriage equality, in the name of advancing equality to the LGBT population.

But some don't, because they think marriage is a bad thing, so bad that nobody should have it. As a personal stance, I believe that's fine. But then, a substantial number of such feminists actually actively oppose the extension of marriage rights, almost in the same way as the religious right. For example, if they were a politician in parliament they would vote against marriage equality bills, and if there was a

referendum held they would vote no too. Some even go out of the way to make a mockery of gay couples who sincerely want to get married.

You know, feminism should be about upholding the equal rights and dignity of all people, with a particular focus on women and others denied their equality by the patriarchy. Going by that spirit, wouldn't that require supporting marriage equality, if only as equality? What you, a particular feminist, think about marriage itself is a non-issue here. The issue is that there are many gay couples out there who want to get married, and the patriarchal religious right is denying them that right. In other words, the issue is not what you, a particular feminist, think is a good choice to make, but what some LGBT people want and are currently denied.

If the feminist movement is serious about 'fighting patriarchy', it needs to be serious

about LGBT rights and equality. And if it really is serious about LGBT rights and equality, it needs to support what many LGBT people want, rather than imposing its view upon them. It's time that old-school feminists really opened up their minds and start listening.

December 2013

One Nation, One Law?

In the absence of action on marriage equality by the federal government, the government of the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) legislated for marriage equality several weeks ago. As expected, the federal government challenged this law and had it struck down by the High Court, due to the fact that the federal government has overriding jurisdiction on the issue of marriage, as stated in the Australian constitution. 31 couples were married under the invalid law, which means that their marriages have also effectively been declared invalid.

This news has since spread around the world, and has received attention even from people in the US. One US commentator praised the US system, where marriage laws are decided on a

state-by-state basis. As of currently, more than a dozen US states (including two of the biggest ones, New York and California) already have marriage equality, with New Mexico being the latest to join the list. The flexibility of the US system has allowed marriage equality to be won in some jurisdictions, even if it remains out of reach in the majority. In contrast, in Australia it is an all-or-none situation.

The US system also has another advantage, in that more states may decide to adopt marriage equality once they see the economic and social benefits it brings to a neighbouring state. I guess this was perhaps one of the reasons for the ACT government's law. Unfortunately, in Australia, we are not provided with this ability.

Chapter 9: 2014 Entries

January 2014

Bringing Families Along

Maria just came out to her family, and to her relief, it went relatively smoothly. Unlike in my case, her parents understood what she was talking about, and were generally accepting. There was no confusion as to whether she was 'going mad'.

I guess coming out at 27 is easier than doing so at 18. But probably more importantly, coming out in 2014 is definitely easier than coming out in 2006. Trans awareness is higher nowadays, thanks to a gradual increase in media reports discussing trans issues. Unlike back then, it is now quite common to encounter stories about

or involving trans people in the mainstream media.

The many media reports discussing trans people and their family going along the journey of transition together have also been helpful. Resources like these simply weren't widely available back in 2006. They show that supporting a trans person and going through the journey together can be a process that strengthens ties through mutual support, a very poignant application of family values. They also show that trans people are not the anti-family-values rebels transphobic commentators portray us to be, we too are people who love our families. Maria showed her parents two videos and several magazine articles relating to trans people situated in the context of their family, and it helped the coming out process.

The world is indeed changing, and for the better. It is waking up to the fact that LGBT people are just people who happen to be a bit different in a certain way, but are still normal people situated in normal families, who just want a better life for themselves and their families.

February 2014

Growing Out Hair

As part of her transition, Maria is growing out her hair, and it's currently stuck at the length where it's very irritable.

So hair became part of our conversation today. The vast majority of trans women grow out their hair during transition. Which is probably not a surprise, as short hair is considered masculine in our society, and long hair is considered feminine. Maria, however, made the observation that many trans men didn't cut their hair for transition, as many have had short hair to begin with. The conversation then turned to why trans women don't often already have long hair to begin with, despite this being their preference.

The truth is that, when it comes to presentation, 'women' (or who society perceives to be a woman) have more freedom. Just think about it. The 'male' equivalent of a tomboy would be considered socially unacceptable in a wide variety of settings. The 'male' equivalent of butch women? I don't think I've seen one. 'Males' are practically still in the mid 20th century or so compared with women, when it comes to socially acceptable dress.

And why is this the case? Historically, both men and women were subject to oppressive gender norms in presentation, as in other areas of life. However, the feminist movement changed all that, for women. As for people who were male, the feminist movement didn't care for them much, at least not until the third wave. But even today, this glaring inequality is just accepted as normal, even by a lot of young feminists. Shouldn't a movement dedicated to

gender equality and liberation think harder, and try harder for change?

Of course, there's another very important reason why feminists should be concerned with this inequality. As women can dress butch and be respectable but men can't dress femme and be respectable, this de-facto means that masculinity is to be preferred and femininity is to be shunned. Any numerical 'equality' that feminism can win on such a playing field will be just numerical, where women can have equality, but only if we behave more like men.

March 2014

Excuses

Marriage equality has officially begun in England and Wales. Scotland is set to follow suit later this year. Nearly 20 US states are also on board now. Australia? Who knows when?

So I have been out and about, both on social media and in the real world, drumming up support and momentum for marriage equality, doing whatever one individual can about the issue. The marriage equality activists in this country are unfortunately not playing it right at the moment, in my opinion. Unlike in the US, where they are riding on the wave of momentum, here the latest action seems to be a campaign telling the whole country that 'We're Waiting'. That's really not good enough.

But what's worse are the excuses I have encountered from other activists or potential activists. They say that there are more important issues. Like homelessness - except how is that an LGBT-specific issue? Or like the inadequacy of LGBT representation in mainstream media - except how is that as important as marriage equality to the actual lives of people? I suspect that these people really do not want to fight for marriage equality at all. It's really not that surprising, when you think about it: many of the 'more radical' LGBT activists have long resisted having anything to do with marriage equality, and in recent years many have given the 'other priorities' excuse. I thought that progress on this front internationally would have changed their attitudes somewhat. But perhaps I was wrong.

This may be controversial, but let me say it: I actually think that the 'more radical' activists are dodging reality, and indulging in fantasy.

Fighting a real political fight is tough and draining work. But it has to be done, if only for the benefit of future generations. On the other hand, one can choose escapism: like saying how 'marriage is unimportant, and so I don't care about marriage equality'. Withdrawing from the civil rights battle of our time maybe an easy choice, but it's definitely an irresponsible one to make, in my strong opinion.

May 2014

The Social Justice Warrior Problem

Like many people undergoing transition, Maria has built a network of trans friends going through transition, mostly at a similar phase to herself. As I've personally experienced, it is very helpful to go through the process with other people.

However, Maria is also worried that her new friends is pressuring her to take particular political stances, and join in certain political activities, all in the name of social justice. Like myself, Maria also thinks that social justice is a good thing, but she is sceptical of her new friends' politics.

I have come to the conclusion that Maria's new friends are in fact 'social justice warriors'

(SJWs). SJWs essentially believe that all social inequalities need to be eradicated as soon as possible, and can resort to extreme, illiberal means sometimes. For example, SJWs have called for businessmen who have funded anti-marriage-equality campaigns and scientists who have made sexist comments to be sacked, and many support an increase in speech restrictions on university campuses in the name of protecting minorities. The internet and especially social media have become their favourite platform for organising and 'collective action', often in the form of sharing or retweeting similar messages together, creating a 'critical mass' that demands to be noticed.

SJWs are kind to trans people. In fact, that would be an understatement. Since they are all about protecting the welfare and equality of underprivileged people, they are very protective towards trans people. They take their opposition to transphobic behaviour and

transphobic speech extremely seriously, perhaps more than even we transpeople ourselves. It is unsurprising that a substantial number of trans people have been attracted to their ranks.

But trans-friendly as they are, Maria and I both remain sceptical of their ways. Our first criticism of them is about freedom. Oppressed minorities only found their voice and got heard due to freedom of speech in the first place, something that SJWs clearly don't cherish enough. The first people to help such oppressed minorities also often had to act against social expectations using their freedom of conscience, another thing SJWs clearly don't cherish enough. Our second criticism of them is that we fear their ways may alienate people, paradoxically entrenching racist, homophobic and transphobic attitudes. For example, in high school I had a friend who was opposed to marriage equality because he thought that it

was part of the cultural elites' way of forcing the rest of us to embrace a radical agenda. Years later he became convinced of the need for marriage equality and the importance it held for many people's lives, and today he is almost as dedicated to the cause as myself. I think that if SJWs were around in the early 2000s, their behaviour would essentially have confirmed his earlier views, and he may never have changed his mind. Our final criticism of SJWs is that they essentially aim to increase the number of rules which society has to observe. I have always had a strong view that rules often unintentionally disadvantage minorities, something that my own lived experience as a trans person has taught me.

SJWs may mean the best for us and for the world, but we really can't say that we accept their agenda in good conscience.

June 2014

Re Affirmative Action

The recent renewed interest in feminism in the Western world has reignited interest in affirmative action. There has been a new found zeal to set up affirmative action quotas where none has existed before, and to increase quotas to 50% where affirmative action already applies. (Quotas like 33% or 40% were more commonly used in the past.)

Here's a truth I haven't dared to speak up about yet: I feel quite uncomfortable about all this. Before my transition, affirmative action quotas, which never included trans people back then, were a major source of gender dysphoria for me. Nowadays, some (but not yet all) affirmative action programs include all 'non cis-men', which I think is a great improvement. But still, what about those trans women who are

still too scared to come out? I feel like supporting affirmative action means that I will be complicit in increasing their dysphoria.

Furthermore, over the years where feminists haven't been the best friends of gender non-conforming people, we trans women have instead formed alliances with other LGB and gender non-conforming people. Over the years, we have fought side-by-side for acceptance and rights. Now, should I support affirmative action programs that will leave behind those 'cis-men', who are gender non-conforming, who are often also gay, and therefore actually suffer at the hands of patriarchy, often even more so than us? I really don't feel comfortable doing so. It would feel like betraying your best friend.

I haven't spoken up because I fear that I would be seen as a traitor to the sisterhood if I did. But here's how I feel. Unfortunately, many

feminists are still quite judgemental of those who don't think the same way as they do. Meanwhile, real people are suffering.

August 2014

Just Blame Abbott

Recently, someone in an online discussion asked the question of why the momentum for marriage equality in Australia seems to have slowed in the past six months. The answer most people gave? Tony Abbott.

Excuse me, but I'm not aware that Tony Abbott has banned discussion on marriage equality, or that he even has the power to. It's true that the Prime Minister is not a supporter, but that's just the same as under Julia Gillard, except that we actually now have a supportive opposition leader. So how is Abbott responsible for the lack of discussion on the issue?

If Abbott is not responsible, then who is? Those who should be discussing it but are not doing

their part, of course. Every social change relies on those who believe in it to champion for it, to say the obvious. If those who claim to be supporters start dropping the ball, a rapid fall in momentum will be inevitable. For the record, I've done my part, but too many supporters have simply dropped the ball ever since Abbott came to power.

Too many so-called activists in this country would like to have their prize handed to them by the government on a silver platter, rather than going out there and putting in years of hard work to fight for it. I'm not joking here - there's been plenty who have said we should wait for Abbott to get voted out and pile the pressure on the next Labor government to deliver. They want to go about it in what they see as the 'route of least resistance'. But that's not how good activism works. You want to know why Australia is lagging behind the US on marriage equality? Let's look back to a decade

ago. Australia had Howard, the US had Bush, both were strongly opposed to marriage equality. The difference was that US activists worked hard, while Australian activists avoided the issue, mostly content to settle for the limited rights the governments had granted us. Apparently, local activists have not learnt that lesson, and are intent on wasting the 'Abbott years' as well.

I know from my personal life the importance of putting in the hard work to persuade people to change, whether you feel you are close to victory or not. Bit by bit, I brought my own family on board in my gender transition. It took years before they became accepting, but over time they did. Change is something to be created day by day, month by month, and year by year, whether it is on a personal or a political level. If you seek to wait for the 'right moment' to act, that moment will never come.

September 2014

A New Landscape for Trans Youth

Maria was talking to me yesterday, about how she hoped she could have transitioned earlier. I simply told her that it would be unwise to make a mess of one's life if the circumstances are not ready yet, and her decision to stall transition back in 2007 was the right one. Surprisingly, she told me that it wasn't even just 2007 she was talking about. She had come across several recent articles about the lives of trans teenagers nowadays, and she regrets not transitioning at their age. She went on to list the things that she 'wouldn't have had to miss out'. I had to remind her to be rational, to remember what the world was really like back when we were in high school, and how a successful transition there was very unlikely.

(Some) trans youth really have it much better nowadays. I'm not saying that there's no discrimination or bullying, because I know that would be false. (Maybe in another generations' time.) But at least they can come out (as long as their family is not super conservative), schools are often accepting, they can live authentically, and they can receive proper treatment from dedicated medical professionals. They probably still don't have an entirely 'normal' life, but at least they don't have to 'miss out on everything watching life go by' like we did.

None of us had this opportunity. But then, the world moves forward step by step, and we should be glad that the next generation gets a better deal than we did, rather than regret upon the limitations of our own lives.

Trans youth today also know that they have more opportunities than ever in life. Granted,

discrimination still exists. But when trans women are even allowed to enter Miss Universe and its associated competitions (and at least two have already done so), you feel like the sky's the limit, and don't feel like you need to compromise on your dreams that much. On a more everyday, 'realistic' level, news reports of trans people making it as professionals of all kinds, models, actors, sportspeople, even YouTube stars are becoming increasingly common. The very low 'trans ceiling' that I felt back when I was a teen has certainly been lifted much higher.

The world owes it to trans youth to not limit their life potential via discrimination and disapproval. I'm glad we're moving in the right direction.

October 2014

My Missed Out Years

The recent talk with Maria about the opportunities for trans youth nowadays and what we had to miss out in contrast has brought me to reflect again on what I 'actually missed out on'.

I've come to the conclusion that, as time passed, the number of things I missed out on has diminished greatly. For example, I found out that it was never too late to make friends as 'one of the girls', and that it really wasn't as different from my previous friendships as one may expect. I may not have been able to attend formal (prom) as a girl, but I have attended many similar events as a girl while at university, more than enough to make up for it. And I was able to shop for outfits with my mother and my girlfriends for these events, just like I would

have done for prom. I may not have graduated high school as a girl, but I certainly graduated university as a confident young woman.

The truth is, most experiences in life are recurring themes, and many experiences are in fact open to people regardless of their age.

I am no longer bitter or sad about my 'missed out years' in any way.

November 2014

Marriage Equality Heads to SCOTUS

It's official: The Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) has agreed to hear several marriage equality cases. So one of the biggest moments of the global fight for marriage equality may finally be happening next June!

Some background here: litigation as to whether the US constitution should guarantee equal access to marriage has been going on for over a year in several states now. This is different from the kind of litigation that brought equality to states like Massachusetts in earlier stages. While those have focussed on state law, and have been prevented in the majority of states by referenda amending the state constitutions, the recent wave is all about seeking to apply the US constitution to justify an obligation on all 50 states to have marriage equality. If

SCOTUS declares in favour of this proposition, all 50 states will have marriage equality, and all state-level bans on marriage equality will be invalidated. Marriage equality will therefore arrive in states where it will otherwise not arrive for at least a generation, because the numbers to run a new referendum to overturn an existing ban will not be there for at least two decades. Just two years ago the idea that marriage equality in the US could be resolved once and for all during the Obama administration would have been mad fantasy, even just a year ago it would have been a radical proposition, but right now it is a very real possibility.

Some further details: The current wave of litigation originated in lower level courts in 2013 in multiple states, encouraged by the SCOTUS ruling in June 2013 striking down sections of the federal Defence of Marriage Act (DOMA), and allowing the federal government

to finally recognise same-sex marriages performed in states that allow them. Since then, most judges have found in favour of marriage equality, but some have not. Either way, cases are then appealed to a higher court by the losing side, eventually reaching SCOTUS. Already, two months ago, SCOTUS effectively legalised marriage equality in 12 states, by refusing applications for further appeal and upholding a lower court's pro-equality ruling. However, this time they were presented with an anti-equality ruling. As they have been presented with a conflict in the lower courts' rulings, SCOTUS has been left with little choice but to decide the law once and for all. Many analysts are predicting a pro-equality outcome, encouraged by the fact that SCOTUS has already allowed pro-equality rulings to stand.

So what's the implication for Australia? We don't have a constitutional Bill of Rights, so this avenue is not open to us. But a pro-equality

ruling from SCOTUS will definitely help marriage equality regain momentum here too. So next year is set to be exciting.

Chapter 10: 2015 Entries

January 2015

Becoming a Feminist

Maria had a talk with me about feminism last week. She has become a dedicated feminist, and she asked me if I identify as a feminist too. I told her I would get back to her later.

All those years ago I decided to reject feminism because it rejected me. I remember writing a diary entry about this in 2007. Essentially, feminism was a club where a large number of its members rejected transwomen back then.

But things may have changed. At least among feminists of our generation, acceptance of transwomen has become nearly universal.

Moreover, many young feminists actually fight side-by-side with us on LGBT rights. And young trans-friendly feminists have become increasingly confident about taking on transphobic feminists, even if they are otherwise long-respected figures in the movement. Partly as a result of these changes, more and more women's colleges in the US are opening their doors to transwomen for the first time.

Transwomen who want to identify as feminists today don't have to fight for their right to do so like a decade ago. They are welcomed into the feminist fold readily by the increasing majority of trans-friendly feminists.

Feminism is changing. And it's not just in relation to trans women. Marriage equality is another area where feminism is evolving. While many old school feminists like Julia Gillard

oppose marriage equality, the new generation of feminists not only support marriage equality, they demand that everyone else support it too. It is still true that some feminists, both young and old, remain sceptical of marriage. But for younger feminists, even if they don't want marriage themselves, they tend to see marriage equality as an equal rights issue rather than an endorsement of marriage itself.

Moreover, it has become 'fashionable' to identify as a feminist again, probably for the first time since the 1970s. Celebrities and popstars are increasingly identifying as feminists, and their popularity have generally increased if they do so. In contrast to a decade ago, nobody questions if feminism is still relevant nowadays.

All this just shows that feminism, like everything else, is not fixed through time. So

should I reassess my approach to feminism? I think it's time I did so.

At the core of it, feminism is just about gender equality. I guess I can call myself a feminist if this is what I believe in. It's OK that I don't agree with many feminists over many issues. Many young feminists disagree with Germaine Greer over trans issues and disagree with Julia Gillard over marriage equality too. It doesn't mean they can't be part of the movement. Feminism is not a political party with a black-and-white platform, after all.

February 2015

Fashion of the Day

Today I spent a day hanging out with Maria and her trans friends, and they talked about how trans issues are becoming like the 'fashion of the day' and how this is making many trans people uncomfortable. They think the recent attention on the coming out of former sports star and reality TV personality Caitlyn Jenner has been especially unhelpful.

I know from personal experience that the vast majority of trans people would prefer less attention. The less attention society pays us the better, because we would blend in easier this way. This is especially important for those undergoing transition right now, in that 'awkward' phase. I can imagine my own

transition would be more difficult in some ways if we received the same level of attention back then. Furthermore, it really feels uncomfortable to be the 'hot topic of discussion' of society at large, to know that everyone around you may be sharing their opinions on the very fact of who you are. Even though I am now long-term transitioned, I am feeling some of this discomfort too, to be honest.

But I would disagree that this is a curse. Rather, it is both a cloud with a silver lining, and an important phase we must pass through, if only for the benefit of future generations.

During my transition, I remember thinking that I just had to put up with the 'limitations' of society that made transition uncomfortable, because you can't expect everyone to understand and accommodate for such a small minority of people. I saw how the gay

community, for example, gradually got society to understand them and support their equality, thinking how it could never happen to us, and how our 'best option' was just to quietly lobby sympathetic politicians to get anti-discrimination laws for us. This approach did end up working in Australia and other places, but while it secured our basic rights to employment and housing, it did not increase societal acceptance at large. Furthermore, there was no guarantee that future transphobic governments may repeal these rights altogether, since there was no public opinion to prevent this from happening.

But now, unexpectedly, we actually have an opportunity to make things much better for the future, for every trans person. This is because once the public understands who we are, I believe they are likely to be sympathetic to our needs and rights. As the gay rights movement has shown, the majority of people are not

actually keen on being bigots, they just have misunderstandings that need to be resolved. And once the public is on side, life will be easier in everything from coming out to employment and housing, to obtaining medical services. Furthermore, securing long-lasting legislative change with clear public support, similar to the gradual increase in gay rights over past decades, is now something we can hope to achieve.

I'm not saying that there won't be some short term pain. But I believe that, for the long term gain, it is worth it to go through this phase.

April 2015

Pronoun Rounds

Today I attended one of the LGBT support meetings Maria regularly goes to, because I was invited to talk to several trans people there about what life feels like in the long term after transitioning.

You know, before this invitation, I had never even thought about 'how life is like now that I'm long-term post-transition'. It's not something you naturally think about. Life just goes on, and whatever new features of life that came about as a result of transition gradually becomes the 'new normal'. Furthermore, while I don't feel 'gender dysphoria' anymore, my life is still quite similar to the way it was before transition, except for gender-specific features. So there really isn't much to talk or think about. But then, I realised that this is exactly what

some people in transition need to hear from people like me: they want to know that there is a future after transition, that life can feel 'normal' and just right.

Attending the meeting itself was quite an experience for me, something unexpected. While this was a regular support meeting for LGBT young adults in the area, trans people did make up nearly a fifth of those in attendance. This stands in contrast to my experience with the so-called LGBT support groups and services that I came into contact with during transition. Back then, they had generally not even seen a trans person, and I became fed up with having to explain myself eventually. Statistically, this change would also likely mean that many more trans people have come out in the past decade. I calculated that if the proportion of gay people vs trans people in this sample is reflective of the wider reality, then trans people would actually have a frequency of about 1 in 500, many times

more than previous reports. In fact, I wonder if there are actually many more trans people than we believed there were all along, with many just hiding in fear or unaware of their true identity all along.

Another interesting feature of the meeting was that it started with a 'name and pronoun round', where everyone introduced themselves providing their name and pronoun. It was the first time I had seen something like this. So here was a solution that can solve all the pronoun problems trans people have ever encountered! I'm still unsure if this is going to be realistic to apply in the wider world where the vast majority of people aren't trans. But then, I was told by someone there that this practice is actually also being introduced in some college-level debating tournaments. Apparently, another reason was that some people wished to be referred to as 'they' rather than a gender-specific pronoun.

June 2015

Two Victories

The US Supreme Court has declared that marriage equality must be granted in all fifty states as per the US constitution, in a 5-4 decision. Thus marriage equality arrives in another country, increasing the total to about 20 now. This victory also arrives a month after Ireland voted by referendum to support marriage equality, with the Yes side winning about 62% of the vote.

Both victories have of course been welcomed by LGBT advocates and supporters. 'Love wins' has become perhaps the most popular phrase to sum it all up. However, the wider reception appears to be quite different. While the Irish vote has become even begrudgingly accepted by even opponents, the Supreme Court ruling has attracted criticism of being 'undemocratic'

by opponents. The different reception is felt even here in Australia: while the Irish result created goodwill from all sides to move the issue forward, the US ruling has attracted scorn even from conservatives here, and I'm worried if the goodwill gained last month may have been diminished as a result.

All this is not surprising. Nobody likes to be told that they are wrong by five elites (even if they are actually wrong), and everybody generally accepts a majority verdict in a democracy. As I understand it, there have been concerns about potential backlash lasting for many years in the US in the event of a pro-equality ruling, even before the ruling was actually handed down. Now it appears that the backlash is just starting. But does this mean the US ruling was anything less than legitimate? I don't think so. If the US constitution guarantees its citizens equality, then marriage equality in all states is a logical conclusion, even if some may not like that.

Some have commented wondering if the US could have gone about it 'more democratically'. But that realistically would have meant a major delay in equality in many, perhaps the majority of states. In the US, marriage is usually decided state-by-state, and many states have a Bush-era constitutional ban on marriage equality, meaning only a referendum can bring about equality. In many states, the numbers to win in a referendum won't be there for many years realistically. If not for the Supreme Court intervention, nationwide marriage equality would likely have been a whole generation away. Many couples who wanted to marry would die waiting. You can't call this fair, I believe.

July 2015

An Issue of Conscience

The Australian Labor Party is soon going to discuss at its national conference as to whether the party will continue to allow a 'conscience vote' on marriage equality. Currently, although the party platform clearly states its support for marriage equality, individual MPs and senators are given a 'conscience vote' on the matter, meaning that they remain free to vote against equality. If the conscience vote is cancelled, all Labor members must vote for equality in parliament, or face expulsion. Labor leader Bill Shorten supports the continuation of conscience vote, but his position is not guaranteed to be carried at the conference.

The move to 'bind' all MPs to vote for equality is controversial for two reasons. Firstly, it's tactically dangerous. The conservative

government is soon to decide whether it too will allow a 'conscience vote', without which it would be very difficult to legislate for equality in parliament. A 'bound' vote in Labor would provide ample argument for the conservatives not to allow their own a conscience vote. Secondly, some supporters of a bound vote have reportedly said that marriage equality is not a matter of conscience but a matter of human rights. This has offended quite a lot of people, as expected.

On the other hand, supporters of the bound vote believe that it will ensure Labor can legislate for equality if it wins the next election, even without the conservatives having a conscience vote. They also believe that Labor should morally require its members to support equality.

Tactically, I don't know which is the better way. As it all depends on future events that haven't happened yet (like the next election), nobody can say for sure either. But I have observed that internationally marriage equality is generally legislated via conscience votes. On the other hand, I do believe that marriage equality should be a matter of conscience, because like all cultural matters, people should be free to maintain the beliefs of their upbringing, whether we like it or not. Telling people they cannot consciously hold the traditional position is counterproductive and can create resentment, I believe. This being said, however, still does not completely exclude support for a bound vote, because the Labor party does not guarantee a conscience vote for all matters of conscience: such votes are guaranteed only for life and death matters like abortion and euthanasia. Complicated, right?

Update: The Labor party actually decided to adopt a bound vote two terms from now, i.e. likely starting in 2019.

August 2015

A Divided Party

The conservative government has decided that, instead of granting its members a conscience vote to resolve the marriage debate either way, they will hold a plebiscite on the issue after the election next year. A plebiscite is, in Australian law, a referendum that does not change the constitution, but rather held to gauge public opinion to guide parliament to amend laws if necessary. The conservatives apparently held a marathon meeting to make this decision, and Prime Minister Tony Abbott fronted the media to announce this policy at about nine in the evening (from my memory).

As expected, Labor's eventual adoption of a bound vote has provided conservatives with a justification not to move to a conscience vote. But another factor in the plebiscite decision

appears to be the divided state of the conservatives on this matter. There are now both staunch supporters and (even more) staunch opponents in their party room now. They probably hope that the plebiscite will mean that they don't have to fight themselves on the matter.

October 2015

More on Social Justice Warriors

I don't agree with the agenda of the social justice warriors (SJWs). Previously in this diary, I gave my reasons for this decision. It's not that I don't agree with the idea of social justice or the need to address bigotry. It's just that I believe in using more 'liberal' and 'rational' methods.

Recently, an SJW asked me what I think of the anti-SJW movement, and how I can in my good conscience let these people use their 'freedom of speech' to encourage hate and bigotry. I have indeed come across some of the things people have said in the name of 'protecting freedom of speech' against SJWs. And trust me, there's plenty of racist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic things they have said, some of which are quite hurtful to me personally as a trans person.

I do not support the self-proclaimed anti-SJW movement. But then I do support freedom of speech, and the existence of this noisy minority is not going to change my mind. My belief is that whenever people 'use' their freedom of speech to spread false or hateful statements, it is our responsibility to stand up for truth and equality, using our own freedom of speech. For example, while it hurts me to hear someone say that 'trans women are not real women', I am strong and rational enough to argue confidently as to why they are wrong. I believe that while these arguments may be painful, they are something we need to have, in order to progress society. While I cannot in good conscience support the SJW movement in its current form, I will wholeheartedly support an alternative movement that seeks to address misunderstandings and spread the message of equality and acceptance using our freedom of speech.

Sometimes I wonder if SJWs act the way they do because they don't have faith in the liberal and rational approach to progress society. They see that there is still plenty of bigotry around, and think that the only way to truly change things is via more radical action. But from my own personal experience, change comes in steps, and things are already getting better all the time, proving that the liberal and rational approach actually works. Today's discussion about trans rights draws from discussions about gay rights and women's rights society has already had, which in turn have drawn on the idea that everyone should be equal, something once considered radical but is generally accepted today. Today's marriage equality movement builds on the gradual increase in gay rights, including importantly the civil union and de-facto rights type reforms gained in the previous decade, and the increasing consensus that LGBT relationships are part of the fabric of

families that form society. At each step along the way, we need to secure the changes we can, and continue to push society along through ongoing liberal and rational discussion. Radical action undermines our ability to do these things, therefore I believe it is ultimately unhelpful.

Chapter 11: 2016 Entries

January 2016

What If Stealth Disappeared?

Traditionally, many trans people chose to live in stealth mode - that is, post transition, they don't let people know they are trans at all. Stealth comes in many 'levels'. On a most 'shallow' level, you could even say I live in stealth mode 90% of the time, simply because I don't tell people that I'm trans generally, even though I have never attempted to actively deny it either. Most definitions of stealth however describe an existence where one actively prevents others from knowing their trans history, for example by fabricating a gender appropriate cis (i.e. non-trans) past. On the deepest level there is 'deep stealth', where possibly even one's partner does not know.

By definition, nobody knows how many people choose to live in stealth.

But recently, some trans people are wondering where the opportunity to live in stealth is disappearing. Firstly, everything has become computerised and records are easily traced. The popularity of social media also means that one's past cannot be easily completely hidden. Secondly, trans awareness has increased greatly in the general population in just the past few years, and it is becoming increasingly difficult to 'pass' 100% of the time. Recently, there have even been quite a few stories of genetic women being misidentified as trans! Remember, just one or two failures to pass can make stealth mode unravel completely.

I agree that the opportunity to live in stealth is fast fading away. But I don't think it's something we need to regret. Many trans

people only 'chose' to live in stealth in the past due to the kind of discrimination they would face otherwise. In a society increasingly accepting of trans people, why would we want to live in stealth? I mean, it involves being 'fake', like being in a new closet, and makes one's life very paranoid in general. In an era where the vast majority of gay and lesbian people come out and live authentically, wouldn't living in stealth be contrary to this spirit of authenticity and acceptance for all?

I think stealth isn't something we should cherish or celebrate at all. It was just a necessity of life for many trans people historically. With the evolution of society towards accepting trans people wholeheartedly, one day, hopefully soon, nobody will feel the need to live in stealth.

February 2016

My Feminism Anniversary

A week ago was my one year anniversary of deciding to embrace feminism. Here are some reflections.

What finally made me able to embrace feminism was the more inclusive form of feminism that I encountered from some in recent years. For too long, I had felt that feminism was somehow exclusive of people like me on many levels, and even with the more trans-friendly style in recent years, I had felt that to be a feminist would be like joining a political party, and having to toe the party line. This really wasn't something I can take. While I was happy that the trans-friendly feminists appeared to have generally won the debate within feminism by early this decade, the whole thing still seemed too much like individuals

trying to bring a reluctant political party along to embrace change, like more enlightened members trying to bring a conservative party to reluctantly accept marriage equality. This, for me, reinforced the view that joining feminism is like joining a political party even more than anything else.

But more recently, I realised that real feminism isn't that 'political party'. While some feminists have unfortunately overly politicised the whole idea and have also policed acceptable stances to take, this really shouldn't be how the concept of feminism operates. And while I am totally put off by this reality, it shouldn't be a barrier for me to embrace what feminism really is: that is, a movement where women and gender minority voices can get heard, and society can be changed to make things more equal. I have become a feminist, but I will never join that 'political party' and toe that party line, because to me, that would be betraying the

real idea of feminism. I hope that more feminists can reflect on this idea, too.

The other thing that used to irritate me about feminism was the elitist attitude, or the 'mother knows best' attitude among many old-school feminists. It's like how they cannot just decide not to marry themselves, they have to effectively join forces with the religious right to prevent LGBT couples from marrying too. It's also like how they used to decide that trans people don't exist, until it became too hard to deny. As somebody who is committed to freedom, whose such commitment comes from a lifetime of being hurt by rules, red-tape and hierarchies who enforce these things, down to even such mundane detail as school uniforms, I just could not bring myself to support any movement in which an elite gets to decide for everyone else and impose rules others have to follow. The 'mother knows best' of some feminists is really no better than the 'father

knows best' of patriarchy. But again, this is not real feminism, just another sad reality we need to overcome.

Real, liberal, feminism should be about listening to the real voices, needs and wishes of women and LGBTs, and find solutions to move forward that enhance liberty and equality, and are inclusive of all. If feminism is serious about looking after minorities' equal rights, then we need to be inclusive, listen to and be empathetic with even the most minority concerns. We need to have conversations about issues all the time. We need to engage everyone, and not have any taboos at all. Above all, we need to maintain an open mind to truly listen.

March 2016

Maria Completes Transition

A few weeks ago Maria told me she felt that her transition was generally done, and today I treated her to a lunch to celebrate this milestone in her life.

We discussed how her experience of transition was. While gender transition is often an emotional rollercoaster and Maria's was no exception, she thought that the experience was mostly positive.

A major difference between my transition and Maria's was that she never felt any of the isolation and 'surreal' feelings that I had. I guess it really helps that nowadays everyone understands what trans is, and many people (and most of our generation) are accepting.

Being trans is increasingly becoming a normal part of everyday life, and not a weird or surreal experience a small minority has to go through alone. You know that's true when newspapers and entertainment magazines discuss trans issues respectfully and not infrequently. Trans people also don't feel like they have to explain themselves as much nowadays. When Maria went through her document changes, she didn't worry about whether the staff would be surprised or give her trouble. Trans people changing their documents are a relatively common thing nowadays, and department websites even have clear instructions about it most of the time.

Transition is still not easy. But it's usually less difficult than just a decade ago.

Going forward, I can see a time where social acceptance and understanding means that

transition is not much of a hassle anymore. Like how coming out as gay is already not much of a big deal in some especially enlightened sections of society. I know it's going to take some time, but I am hopeful.

June 2016

Erasing Gender Boundaries

A high school here in Sydney has become the first to announce a new uniform policy where there are no gender boundaries, i.e. where all students can choose the pants uniform or the skirt uniform. This has predictably caused some controversy and outrage from conservative sections of society. But I do welcome this development. After all, it would have been what I wanted when I was in high school. Even if it's far too late for me to have this opportunity, I am happy for other trans people to have it.

I believe in erasing unnecessary gender boundaries. This doesn't mean people won't be able to continue to identify as male or female clearly and exclusively. It just means that we don't have to create rigid rules around it as a

society. Some people are fearful of this kind of change, but what's there to fear about, really? It's almost as irrational as a fear of same-sex marriages, which was quite common just a decade ago.

Just like marriage equality, erasing unnecessarily rigid gender boundaries won't mean any trouble to anybody, but would mean a world of difference to a few. It would make trans people's lives so much easier.

July 2016

Front Page for Marriage Equality

Today (July 2) is election day in Australia, and the newspapers have come out with a final round of polls and endorsements. While the polls for the election itself remains in dead heat territory, one newspaper had conducted a poll regarding marriage equality along with their final election polls, and found that 70% of respondents were in support. Consequently, the newspaper has said, on its front page no less, that whoever wins government, this is the one thing we surely want from both of them.

In this election, all three major party leaders are supporters of marriage equality, for the first time ever. There are differences in their approach to the issue, regarding whether it should be put to a plebiscite (public vote, like a referendum) or just a vote in parliament, and

this may spell some short term trouble in the next year or so. But all three leaders are committed supporters, still. Therefore, I remain optimistic that we will get there soon enough.

But the most striking thing is that, marriage equality has gone from the issue that progressive politicians avoid and conservative politicians use to wedge them just a decade ago, to an cause with widespread mainstream support, even deserving of a front page newspaper endorsement on election day. It is due to supporters making their case again and again, changing minds everywhere they go, that we have come to this point. It just shows that, if you open up a conversation and put up a persuasive case, while respectfully addressing the concerns sceptics have too, you can change a lot in even just a decade. The marriage equality movement is indeed a model other social movements should learn from.

August 2016

No Labels

Recently, at least two female celebrities who are dating other women have refused to put a label on their relationship or their sexuality. This has started a discussion in the wider community: is it necessary to have labels? After all, people who are heterosexual don't have to emphasize that they are 'straight', and don't have to particularly label their relationship as a 'straight relationship'.

I agree. While I think that labels need not be abandoned because they are useful descriptors, it is actually unfair to expect gay couples to wear the 'gay' label if we don't expect heterosexual couples to wear the 'straight' label.

Furthermore, I think it may apply to trans people too. Not every trans person wants to wear the 'trans' label. Some do so proudly, but not everyone. So if a trans person wants to be 'just a boy', 'just a girl', or even 'just a person', I think everyone should respect it.

September 2016

LGBT Identity and Political Affiliation

The results of the Australian election are that the conservative government, headed by moderate (i.e. not conservative) Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull has been narrowly returned. This time there are also six LGBT members of parliament, more than ever before. I think that's worth celebrating in and of itself. However, not all LGBT advocates are celebrating, because four of the six are on the conservative side of politics.

This reminds me of the attitude some activists have towards Caitlyn Jenner, who supports the Republican Party. When some leftist LGBTs learned of her political orientation and beliefs, they almost immediately withdrew their initial supportive stance towards her. I think it's sad.

Some left-wing LGBT activists have a habit of hating on LGBTs who don't side with the left politically. Their attitude is that LGBTs who support the right are 'traitors' to our community. While it is true that the left has provided us with more legal rights and respect than the right historically, this attitude is something I find really problematic.

LGBTs are people too, and I think we can all agree that everyone deserves equal rights and opportunities in life, in every area. If LGBTs are only allowed to support or join particular political parties, how can you call that equality? The LGBT movement also prides itself on encouraging people to be authentic. Wouldn't you think that, statistically, there would have to be a substantial number of LGBTs whose authentic political orientation is on the right side of the spectrum?

Furthermore, strategically it would also make sense to have right-wing LGBTs in politics, so that we can engage with both sides of politics. As the marriage equality battles have shown, we need plenty of support from both sides of politics if we are to win reforms. While it is expected that more of the support would come from the left side of politics, we still need plenty of right-wing support.

Finally, let me say this to the aforementioned leftist activists: if you moved to a parallel universe where it is the right wing who are the primary champions of LGBT rights, will you be able to just change all your political beliefs and allegiances to fit this reality? And if you decide to still stay with the left and work for change from within, how will you feel if others label you as a 'traitor'?

p.s. a similar phenomenon can also be observed in feminism, unfortunately. According to some feminists, you can't be a good feminist if you are politically right-wing, opposed to affirmative action, pro-life (even if it's just a personally held religious belief), or, in some ridiculous cases, even if you don't believe in man-made climate change. While we are personally free to agree or disagree with any of the aforementioned stances (I certainly disagree with some of them myself), they should not be grounds to be shut out of the feminist movement. Every criticism of the narrowness of some in the LGBT rights movement in this entry can also apply to some feminists, unfortunately, and this needs to change. Both LGBT rights and feminism can only become stronger when the tent is big enough to include everyone who is pro-queer and pro-women, and is also big enough to include all sorts of ideas and ideals.

October 2016

So, the Australian government has decided to resolve the marriage equality issue once and for all by a plebiscite, that is, a referendum-style popular vote. However, it looks like it won't be happening. LGBT activists have loudly claimed that the public debate would be harmful for LGBT people, and hence they would rather have the issue in a continued stalemate than have the plebiscite. They have put a huge amount of pressure on the opposition Labor Party to block the legislation allowing the plebiscite, and Labor appears to be headed towards that decision.

I personally have a lot of problems with what's happened. Firstly, I don't recall the whole LGBT community having been consulted about their opinions. I certainly didn't receive a questionnaire on the matter. It appears to me that the side with the best ability to organize and the biggest number of activists is claiming

to represent everyone, which is simply not right. Moreover, they have also been pushing the idea that everyone who supports marriage equality opposes the plebiscite, and vice versa. While most people who oppose marriage equality appear to strongly support the plebiscite, perhaps because it will give them a chance to vote 'no', most people who support marriage equality also support the plebiscite according to the polls, probably because it will give them a chance to vote 'yes', and to help resolve this issue once and for all. Somehow, this truth is being denied. Furthermore, even if only a minority of the LGBT community is keen enough for marriage equality to happen to be willing to go through a plebiscite, this still needs to be respected. Remember, the smallest minority is always one, and if there is injustice for even one person, there is no justice in the true sense of the word. Forcing even one LGBT couple to wait against their will is simply not acceptable.

I also think this illustrates the creep of what I call 'safety politics', built around the idea of psychological safety being worth everything. I have been noticing this trend for two or three years now. In fact, last year there was a famous article in The Atlantic by two prominent American intellectuals, titled 'The Coddling of the American Mind', where the authors described the trend towards this style of thinking on American college campuses. At the time, some people said that it was all just campus immaturity, that like all campus politics it had very limited impact on the rest of the world. I think this drama surrounding the Australian marriage plebiscite shows us that it's not just campus politics. There could be real flow on effects on national political debates around the Western world. A politics of 'safety' justifies limiting free speech, and as this plebiscite drama has shown, could even justify the prevention of certain democratic exercises,

even if the vast majority of the population agree to such an exercise. Therefore, I believe a politics of 'safety' is no less than an existential threat to freedom and democracy.

Chapter 12: 2017 Entries

January 2017

The election of Donald Trump as US President has caused much more of a political earthquake than I had anticipated. Although I didn't expect Trump to win the election, I couldn't have imagined the outrage it would cause in some circles! It has been getting particular intense these few days, leading up to his inauguration. I mean, it's OK to dislike Trump. I strongly disliked Bush when I was younger, and Trump is not my favourite either. But to overreact like this is unhealthy, I think. It leads to severe polarization and tribalism, which is always bad for freedom and independent thinking.

Another thing I couldn't understand is how people are linking Trump's victory with the Brexit vote in mid 2016, when the UK voted to leave the European Union. I personally don't

see the link there. One was the election of a President; the other was a decision on economic and foreign policy that didn't even change the government. I think the attempt to link the two is no more than a paranoid exercise in painting 'the enemy' as being everywhere. Honestly, I am pretty disappointed with politics and political commentators these days.

February 2017

Several recent events have made me rethink my relationship with feminism. Firstly, there was the series of events known as the Women's March, held as protests against Trump being president. The concept itself is unfairly divisive, since it's not like men conspired to force women to accept a Trump presidency. Many women did vote for Trump, and many men voted for Hillary too. Moreover, I have heard multiple reports of people being excluded or else felt uncomfortable in some of these events, because of their political beliefs. As a freedom loving liberal with a strong individual conscience, I would feel very uncomfortable if feminism is heading into this direction.

Secondly, there was this whole drama around The Red Pill, a film made by an ex-feminist about the Men's Rights Movement. While many feminists feel uncomfortable about that movement, I don't think they should have the

right to prevent a film about it being screened. Now, I'm not saying anything about the content of that film; I haven't seen it and I don't plan to either, because it doesn't interest me. But free speech is free speech, and I don't think there should be any exceptions. If feminism includes limiting free speech now, then again, I would feel very uncomfortable.

All this has made me think, and made me realize something: I am getting uncomfortable with some of what is called feminism in the West in 2017. And that is OK, because I have an independent conscience, and I don't have to accept every change in the fashion of the day. That doesn't make me any less of a feminist, because I abide by the original definition of feminism, the one the suffragettes fought under 100 years ago: equality of all individuals regardless of their gender. It is this principle my conscience will answer to, not whatever fashion of the day is being pushed out there. My

feminism certainly doesn't exclude people based on their political beliefs, nor does it prevent others from exercising their free speech. And if that means I'm no longer considered a 'good feminist' by some people out there, so be it. So be it!

March 2017

About two years ago, I first learned about pronoun rounds. I even wrote an entry in this diary about it. At that time, I found it kind of useful for specific settings, for example LGBT meetings, but I wasn't sure if it could be applied more generally. Now, I am more certain that it cannot.

You see, pronoun rounds are a big change to the social conventions of everyday interaction, and many people would find it somewhat difficult to adapt. Furthermore, since most people's gender clearly match their presentation, it would be redundant in 99% of cases. As can be expected, there has been very little 'progress' towards the universal adoption of pronoun rounds, the utopian ideal of some LGBT activists. On the other hand, since scoring 'woke' points is essential in some circles nowadays, some people would do a pronoun round whenever they suspect they are in the

company of a trans person. This has rendered the pronoun round equivalent to subtly announcing to a trans person that they have been clocked. Many trans people have expressed discomfort at this change, even if only quietly.

I think the project to universalize pronoun rounds should just be abandoned, because it's not happening anyway, and it's making things awkward for trans people. I think pronoun rounds are best reserved for special circumstances, like LGBT meetings.

June 2017

I have a feeling that the social justice wave of the past few years is crashing. And no, it's not due to Donald Trump, despite what the 'progressive' media may say. At least not directly. Rather, it's because people are feeling disillusioned. From what I see, ever since the 'craziness' that came with the election of Trump, even some people who were happy to go along with the social justice movement for the past few years are turning away from it.

People are feeling disillusioned that the movement seems to have taken a turn for the worse, and that the loudest activists don't seem to mind at all. Many of us feel that a movement that truly cares about justice of any kind wouldn't want to be so divisive, and wouldn't trample on basic liberal democratic values like free speech. Many of us believe in the path of justice through bringing people together to discuss and resolve issues, and the more

extreme actions since the election of Trump has certainly damaged any prospect of this happening. I feel as if the movement for 'social justice' has lost its compass, or else has been hijacked by some very ideological elements. What I fear most is that, if we continue to head down this road, injustice will be done in the name of justice.

I think it's time we voiced our aforementioned feelings and observations more. This is a discussion we desperately need to have.

August 2017

Having had its plans for a plebiscite on marriage equality blocked last year, the Australian government has turned to the solution of holding a postal survey. People will be sent a paper form where they can indicate whether they support marriage equality. They will be able to vote by simply mailing the completed form back to the government. I don't know how this will work out, but at least we appear to have a way out of the stalemate, which is better than nothing.

However, some activists are already calling for a boycott of the postal survey. What will that achieve? Letting the 'no' side win, and nothing else. If this boycott becomes a thing, most people will still vote, because the polls say that more than 70% of the population want the plebiscite. The 'turnout' will still be high enough for the result to be credible. However, some 'yes' voters will not be participating, which will

likely allow the 'no' side at least a narrow win. Which will, of course, sink marriage equality at least for several years.

I feel like some people just want to oppose things for the sake of opposing, to make conflict for the sake of conflict, even if there's only loss and no gain from such an action. This trend can perhaps be traced to at least five years or so ago, but it really took off with the election of Trump as US President. To be honest, I really worry about our future.

15 November 2017

This morning, it was announced that 61.6% of Australia had voted for marriage equality. We won! The Australian government has promised to put marriage equality into law, likely before Christmas. A battle that has raged on for over a decade is finally over.

The postal survey itself was a relatively peaceful process, contrary to predictions from many activists. The political discourse that came out of it has certainly been better than at many other times in recent political history in the West. In the 'yes' camp, there was a broad sense of unity, which would otherwise be missing. Between the 'yes' and 'no' camps, people generally disagreed civilly, at least more civilly than in many other areas of political disagreement in 2017. It turns out that the pressure of having to appear as reasonable people during a public campaign is still very

effective for making political actors on all sides behave well.

I think the biggest lesson we can draw from this process is that we can achieve a lot when we choose peaceful debate over heightening conflict; when we choose to bring people together rather than to be divisive; when we choose to work with people rather than to define others as enemies. Just over a decade ago, only 38% of Australians supported marriage equality, similar to many other Western countries. Today, 62% of them do, again similar to many other Western countries. This shows that it is possible to change hearts and minds, that rational debate in the free market of ideas works. Of course, patience is also key, just like in any great reform movement that had come before, and any great reform movement that will come afterwards. But the point is, people who may disagree with you today could potentially become allies

tomorrow, especially if you try to bring them on board nicely.

I feel like the Western world is heading towards an important fork in the road. Some political players on both sides are becoming nastier than ever before towards their opponents, and they don't seem to mind the conflict that is threatening to tear the social fabric apart. These people are leading us down the road of endless conflicts and bitterness. However, the road of peaceful debate and negotiation towards a better future is still available. I hope that positive experiences like the postal survey we just had will end up convincing us to choose the more constructive path.